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OR,
Rounding-up the Greasers

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CHAPTER I.

THE TRAIN ROBBERY.

"NUMBER TWELVE held up near Forrest, at eleven last night. Express messenger and engineer killed. Safe blown open. Contents and bar silver stolen."

This rather startling message was received at 7 o'clock in the morning at the office of the S. A. & U. P. Railway, at San Antonio, Texas.

FRED, BOUND ON A HORSE, WAS GUARDED BY THREE OF THE MEXICANS.

The operator at Forrest had just been released from the bonds in which he had been confined since 10:30 the previous night, and the above was the first despatch he sent.

"Number Twelve" was an Express train, and Forrest a small station about twenty-five miles northwest of San Antonio—so small that no Express train ever stopped there.

The despatch, however, only confirmed what was already known, for immediately on being released from the guard set over it by the bandits, the train proceeded to San Antonio, and there reported the hold-up.

Two empty boxes, with several auger holes in them, told the story of the robbery in the baggage car.

The dead body of the faithful messenger and the blood-stained floor proved how bravely, though ineffectually, he had defended his trust.

The wounded fireman added his further evidence.

Just after passing Forrest, two men, who had climbed over the tender, appeared at the rear of the cab and ordered the engineer to slow up.

The engineer was looking out ahead; the fireman attending to the furnace.

Cheatham, the engineer, a big, powerful man, instead of obeying the order, snatched up a heavy iron wrench, while Jackson, the fireman, grasped his coal shovel, and both sprang at the bandits.

Two revolvers cracked simultaneously; the engineer fell back dead, and the fireman received a bullet in the shoulder.

With two revolvers staring him in the face, Jackson obeyed the stern order to "Stop her or die!"

As soon as the train stopped a number of horsemen and extra horses came up to the baggage car.

The safe had already been blown open, and the money packages, together with a lot of specie and bar silver, were handed out by the two robbers who had killed the express messenger.

Four of the extra horses carried stout canvas bags and into these the treasure was stowed.

This part of the job was performed by five or six of the band, while the others rode up and down on each side of the train to prevent interference.

No attempt was made to rob the passengers; the game was too small.

When the extra horses were loaded the two men in the baggage car jumped out and rode away, leading the pack horses, at a rapid pace.

For an hour longer the train was detained—evidently to give the pack horse detachment a good start before an alarm could be raised; then the man who remained in the cab called for his horse.

This man was apparently in command, for when his horse was brought he jumped from the locomotive, mounted, and, with two shrill whistles, brought the entire band to his side—about a dozen of them, and having ascertained that all were present, the leader gave the order: "Now scatter! And ride as though Jack Hays was after you!"

In an instant the command was obeyed, every man riding off in a different direction.

This was the fireman's narrative.

By the time he had finished Sheriff Maguire had arrived, and within an hour had started with twenty men on a special train for Forrest, where the hunt must begin.

"I wish they were my own men," muttered the sheriff, as they started, but his men were away on another errand and would not be back until later in the day.

Sheriff Maguire had been a miner and a hunter in his day, and was himself well fitted to take up and follow a trail.

But when he reached the scene of the robbery he found it was not a trail—it was which trail he should follow, and quickly realized that his hastily gathered posse was not composed of the kind of men he now required.

It was just as Jackson had said—the bandits had all gone in different directions and there were a dozen trails to choose from.

Suddenly the sheriff remembered the pack horses.

Sweeping around in a half circle, he quickly found the trail of these, and with a loud hurrah the posse started off.

The trail was as plain as a pikestaff, and for an hour they followed it at a rattling gait.

They were approaching a small stream when the sheriff suddenly noticed that more riders, or at any rate horses, had joined the party he was following.

On reaching the stream, now a swift running, turbulent affair, though usually quiet enough, Maguire realized the cause of the addition to the treasure-bearing party.

The heavily laden pack horses would never have been able to cross unless relieved of part of their precious burden, for, although a bar of silver is not much to look at, it will weigh from 175 to 180 pounds, and these additional men had evidently joined the party to assist in getting the silver across.

About a hundred yards beyond the stream stood a blasted oak tree, and on reaching this another difficulty cropped up.

Instead of six or eight horses, the trail here looked as though twenty more had joined the party.

The ground was all torn up, as if by impatient riding back and forth, and when one of the posse leaped from his horse to pick up a twenty-dollar gold piece, the sheriff exclaimed:

"Boys, this is where they met and divided! Now let's get after 'em. They've got a little start on us, but they're heavily loaded."

With another cheer the posse started again, but were compelled to stop short before they had gone a quarter of a mile.

Leaving the blasted tree, the bandits had moved in a solid body, but at this point they split up again into three parties, and from the hoof-prints Maguire judged there must be six to nine men in each squad.

There were, altogether, twenty-one men in the posse, which would make three parties of seven each.

Should he divide and follow the trails separately? It was no longer possible to say which embraced the pack horses—even supposing they had not divided the treasure.

While inwardly debating this question, he happened to glance in the direction of the westerly trail—which was the center one of the three—and saw a thin column of smoke rising from a clump of trees about three miles away.

It was not like a signal smoke, being a pure white column from dry, light wood—such a smoke as might be risked in cooking a breakfast in an enemy's country.

"See, boys!" cried the sheriff. "We've got some of 'em, anyhow! They're at breakfast, sure as shootin'!"

A minute later the posse was tearing away at tremendous rate toward the grove.

Only six or eight of the bandits were there. What had they to fear?

For an old campaigner Sheriff Maguire was going at it somewhat rashly, and

this seemed to occur to him when within a mile of the grove.

"Hold up, boys! Let's go a bit slow," he said. "There's no tellin' what's awaitin' fur us in there!"

His greenhorns laughed at the idea of danger and insisted on going ahead. Every man in the grove was worth a goodly sum, dead or alive, and they were eager for the fight.

A hint from one of the posse, that if the sheriff was afraid he could remain where he was until they returned, settled the matter.

"Well, blast ye, come along!" exclaimed Maguire, angrily. "An' take care ye don't regret it!"

The party rode on in silence until within a quarter mile of the grove, then the sheriff ordered a halt.

"Now, a half-dozen o' ye swing 'round 'n' get t' th' rear o' them trees, while th' rest of us take 'em in front. When ye hear us firin', sail in! Now, git thar—lively!"

The point Maguire was heading for was due west; to the northeast, and about a mile distant, was a similar clump of trees, and had he looked the sheriff might have seen a column of smoke rising from this immediately after the first one.

As the posse approached the grove a solitary rifle shot rang out on the morning air, and Sheriff Maguire fell—shot through the head.

"There! Senor Maguire will not trouble Jose Morales any more, I think."

The speaker—a swarthy, villainous looking Mexican, who had fired the fatal shot from behind a tree not a hundred yards away—now hurried away and joined his party, which stood mounted and ready for action a little farther south.

The posse, which had disintegrated only a minute or two before, halted by the sudden death of their leader, irresolutely, and some turned back to go back to the horses.

It was a body without a head now, and the necessity of having a leader quickly suggested itself.

"Let's get back to th' hosses 'n' pick out who's goin' t' boss this crowd!" urged one man, adding: "These chaps are watchin' us, but we'll be out o' range there."

The six men in the wood watched this movement with contempt.

"Dick!" exclaimed a tall, slim fellow, carrying four revolvers in his belt, and a Winchester rifle at his saddle-bow—"Cole! They're a lot of greenhorns! If we give them a volley and charge they won't stop running until they get home!"

"All right, Jim! Let her go!" responded the man addressed as Dick.

A word to Morales, and he, too, was in the saddle.

"Now, then, move quiet until we reach the open," ordered Jim, and picking their way between the trees, the bandits obeyed his directions so well that their proximity was not suspected until they burst from the grove at the spot from which Morales had fired.

Six of the posse on the other side and Maguire dead, left fourteen men to face the bandits, who came swooping down on them.

Excellent horsemen were the scoundrels, guiding their horses by pressure of the knees, thus leaving both hands free to use their revolvers, which they did with terrible effect.

Half a dozen of the now demoralized posse were down, almost before they realized it, and the never-ceasing leaden hail, vomited from the mouths of twelve skillfully handled revolvers, proved too much for the survivors, who turned tail and fled, after firing a few harmless shots.

But not all those who fled escaped, for although the bandits did not pursue, the Mexican unslung his rifle the moment the order to halt was given and before they could get out of range three more of the fleeing posse toppled from their horses.

Just as Morales began his deadly work the six men who had gone around to attack the bandits in the rear came out of the woods to aid their comrades.

"Here's the rest of the idiots! Finish 'em up quick!" yelled Jim, dashing forward to meet the astonished newcomers, and within five minutes after they had come out of the grove, the six men were down, and of the posse of twenty-one, only five returned to tell the story.

As the fleeing five disappeared in the distance the two parties of bandits joined forces and at once struck off almost due south—evidently bound for Mexico.

CHAPTER II.

THE BOY CAPTAIN'S POSSE.

The sheriff's party had just started on its ill-fated expedition when a young man, about nineteen or twenty years of age, knocked on the door of the private office of the general manager of the S. A. & N. P. Railway.

Col. Soule was very busy preparing copy for a poster offering heavy rewards for the apprehension of the robbers, and the recovery of the treasure—separately and together.

He looked up angrily on hearing the noise, and frowned as he said, "Come in!"

"Oh! It's you, Fred?" he continued, a smile taking the place of the frown. "Sit down for a few minutes. I'm very busy with that infernal robbery just now. Heard about it?"

"Yes, sir; and if you can possibly spare me five minutes now it's that I wish to talk to you about."

"Yes," he continued, as the colonel pushed back his chair, and, with a look of surprise nodded to him to proceed. "I heard of it very early this morning, and I saw the sheriff and his party start off a few minutes ago, but, uncle, they won't do anything!"

"Won't do anything?" repeated the colonel, in surprise. "What do you mean?"

"Just this. Maguire is all right, himself, for this kind of work, but the men he has are all new, and no good at that. I doubt if they will ever lay eyes on the robbers, but if they should it will be to their sorrow. Men who can do a job like that of last night are not likely to be conquered by a lot of vagabonds and loafers!"

Colonel Soule stared at the young fellow, too astonished for a few moments to speak.

"Well, Fred," he said at length, "you have something to propose?"

"Yes, sir. I believe—in fact I am sure—that, if you will ask Captain Morgan for a dozen of his cowboys, we can get back the treasure and punish those murderous thieves!"

"We!" echoed the Colonel. "Do you thing of going with them?"

"Why not?" asked the young man, adding, "I can ride and shoot and follow a trail as well as the best of them! You are offering big rewards, and I don't see anything against my trying for part of the money! Captain Morgan is across the street now, and almost all his men are in town. May I tell him you want to see him?"

The young fellow spoke so eagerly and looked so handsome, the excitement dyeing his sunburnt cheek a deep red, that Colonel Soule laughed—and felt a little proud of him, too.

After a few minutes' thought he said: "Go ahead, Fred! You may tell Morgan I wish to see him!"

Fred hurried across the street, and, after a few minutes' conversation, Captain Morgan was heard to say:

"All right, my boy! I'll do what I can for you, but be off, now, and find the boys!"

Captain Morgan was a wealthy ranchman, and the "boys" referred to were his cowboys, who had come to town with a large drove of cattle.

Leaving the captain to deal with his uncle, the young man hurried away and returned in a short time with fifteen or twenty men, whom he left at the hotel, while going to ascertain the result of the interview between the captain and his uncle.

The captain proved an able advocate, for when Fred entered the office it was settled that he should accompany the cowboy expedition.

"Found 'em, Fred?" asked Captain Morgan.

"Yes, sir! All across the street! Is it all right?"

The two men smiled, and Captain Morgan replied:

"On one condition, Fred! You must not ask to have charge of the expedition."

The young man did not care about the fun that was being poked at him; he was too delighted to learn he had gained his point.

A few minutes later Captain Morgan went across the street and picked out a dozen of the best men. "Now, boys," he explained, "Fred has told you the object of this expedition, so there's no need of my speaking about that, but if any of you don't like the job I want to know it now!"

"Well, I dunno ez I keer 'bout goin'," spoke up one of the cowboys, a fine looking fellow, and a man of undoubted courage, Bill Hawkins by name.

"You don't, Bill?" exclaimed the captain in evident surprise.

Bill looked a little confused, but replied:

"No, cap; I reckon I'll stay back. Ye see, Fred's goin', 'n' that makes ez thirteen, 'n' of course I don't want ter spoil fun. I'd rather stay back myself than keep Fred."

"Oh, ho! So that's it, Bill? Well, you need not stay home on that account, for there's another man—a stranger, going with you."

The captain smiled triumphantly, the men laughed; Hawkins was satisfied, and within an hour the second expedition started for Forrest, where the fourteenth man was to join it—and a genuine surprise he proved to be.

He was dressed like a Mexican, but one glance was sufficient for the keen-eyed cowboys.

"A redskin, by the Lord Harry!" exclaimed Hawkins, seeing Captain Morgan shaking hands with this man, who stood leaning against the depot building at Forrest.

A redskin he was, indeed, but such a one as they had never seen before—nearly seven feet tall and beautifully proportioned, he looked as strong as a lion and as agile as a tiger.

While the party were staring at him in admiration, Captain Morgan was holding a conversation with this splendid specimen of his race, and a few minutes later introduced him thus:

"Boys, this is Starlight, or Red Lightning, as we used to call him, when he was with Colonel Soule and I under the government—a chief of the Comanches, who formerly ruled the roost about here. He's your fourteenth man, and its lucky

I heard he was in this neighborhood and wired down to keep him until we arrived, for you'll find him better than three men in strength and a dozen in cunning. Better than all, he knows every hole and corner in the State, and across the border, too."

Every one likes praise, and Red Lightning grinned approval of this speech.

"And now," continued Captain Morgan, "who is to boss this crowd?"

There was no reply to this—each man looking at his neighbor as though expecting him to do the talking.

"Bold enough to fight, but too modest to talk!" commented their employer, and then added:

"Suit yourselves, of course, but, as I couldn't spare Jim, your own captain, from the range, and as you are all too modest to talk, what do you say to the boy, Fred? You all know him, he's smart, and it will avoid jealousy! Make Bill, here, lieutenant, and he can advise him."

"Good enough! Keereet! Let 'er go at that! 'Rah for Captain Fred! And Lieutenant Bill!" were the exclamations that greeted the captain's suggestion, and, to his astonishment, Fred was made commander of the second expedition, which took the trail five minutes later.

The stream and the blasted oak were quickly reached and left behind; then came the division of the trail into three parties.

"Guess we'd better take a run after the sheriff—four or five of us, while the rest keep south," suggested Bill. "This split-up looks ez tho' they wuz tryin' t' draw him off 'n' mebber inter a trap."

"Good talk! No need look further than trees!" was the attentive Indian's comment, indicating the grove.

Accordingly, four of the party, headed by Bill, rode rapidly toward the scene of the slaughter, while the others followed the southern trail at a slower pace.

Looking back, shortly after, Fred saw Bill's party coming, and halted long enough to learn the fate of the first expedition. The dead left on the ground told the terrible story.

"It'll be no picnic when we do ketch 'em!" averred Bill, as the order was given to start. "Six to twenty-one wuz big odds, but they didn't lose a man 'n' licked the posse at that! Looks jist like Morales' work!"

There was no underrating of the bandits, now, but the cowboys pushed forward with increased speed, never halting for rest or dinner, until it became too dark to distinguish the trail.

Supper was then quickly prepared, and while eating one of the party, in half jesting way, said:

"Say, Cap! I guess ye furgot dinner t'day, didn't ye?"

"Not likely, since I started without breakfast," was the quiet reply.

"What's the use o' rushin' that way?" persisted the other. "We must 've covered forty mile t'day!"

"Nearly fifty, Mose, and between this and to-morrow night some of us must do a hundred more, even if we kill the horses!"

The rest of the party, who had been listening with amusement to Mose's questioning, now stared in amazement.

"Ye can't do it, captain!" asserted Bill Hawkins, quietly, but emphatically.

"We must, Bill! We are twenty-five miles from the head of the Neuces, and they are probably that far on the other side of it. Now, we must get in sight before they cross the Rio Grande, and they are only about twenty-five or thirty miles from it. If they once get to the other side unseen, it's dollars to doughnuts we lose them altogether!"

Red Lightning nodded his head ap-

provingly. Bill looked puzzled, while the rest wondered to hear such language from their beardless boy captain.

"Well, Fred," answered Bill, "I'll agree with ye 'bout losin' 'em, but how're ye goin' t' do it? The hosses won't stand it?"

"This way: I've got a powerful reflecting lantern in that package I brought along, and I intend to start in an hour or so with Red Lightning. You and the boys can follow on to-morrow."

"By Gum! Ye've got the grit, anyhow!" exclaimed Bill, admiringly, "but what's th' good of it? The hosses 'll peter out ag'in daylight!"

"Oh, no! We will have to go slow until dawn, and then, with an hour's rest, while we eat, they'll probably last it out at a pretty lively pace until noon," returned the young captain, so placidly that Bill laughed as he asked:

"Well, after that—what'll ye do?"

"Do? Why, foot it, of course—and lively, too, but if we can get within ten miles of 'em, I can tell where they are and what they're doing. I will carry the field glasses instead of my rifle. You can pick up the horses—if they are alive. Call me in an hour, please."

And, rolling himself in his blanket, Fred went to sleep, while Red Lightning, grinning at the astonished cowboys, followed his young leader's example.

Promptly at the expiration of an hour they started, Fred holding the lantern, which threw a strong light for twenty feet ahead, leading the way, with the wary Red Lightning at his saddle skirts.

"Wal, I'll be gol-durned!" exclaimed Bill, as he turned back to the group at the fire. "Boys, we're 'way behind the age! Cap Morgan thought it wur a good joke, but I'm willin' t' give up that Fred's got the biggest head in the crowd."

"Yes, an' just think, when he come to us only a year ago, a pale faced kid from the East!" chimed in another.

"Him 'n' you wuz pooty thick from the start, Bill. W'ot the deuce's his last name?" came from another.

"Campbell," replied Bill, "and don't ye make eny mistakes, boys, he'll get thar to-morrer ez sure ez my name's Hawkins. We'll have t' hustle t' ketch up with them to-morrer night, so let's turn in. Jim! You 'n' Mose better keep yer eye peeled fur a couple of hours, 'n' then call me."

But, within an hour, poor Mose, on guard, was shot dead, and Hawkins awakened to join his comrades in a fierce fight for life against twice their number of Mexicans and Indians.

CHAPTER III.

ANNIHILATING A POSSE.

Traveling by lantern-light proved a great success, for when day dawned, the boy captain and Red Lightning had reached the head of the Neuces River, having covered almost thirty miles during the night. There they halted for rest and food.

"We will have to skirmish round for the next meal," remarked Fred, as they again mounted and resumed their journey.

They had taken only enough food for one meal on leaving camp, and this supply was now exhausted.

Strapped to Red Lightning's saddle under his right leg, were a bow and a dozen arrows, the primitive weapon of the Indian, and, tapping these significantly, he replied:

"Get um easy by 'n' bye."

Once across the river, here only a narrow streamlet, the horses being refreshed by the rest and food, they pushed on with renewed vigor, and at a rate far surpassing Fred's expectations.

About noon it became apparent that the wiry mustangs could last no longer; and shortly after, they halted in the shade of

a few trees near a noisy brook, where unexpected good fortune greeted the now hungry riders, for hanging to the limb of a tree was a young antelope, from which both haunches had been removed, and some of it cooked on the spot, evidently by the bandits, who were thus unwittingly furnishing supplies to the enemy.

"We must be pretty close to them," decided Fred, on making this discovery.

"'Bout two hours dead," rejoined the Indian, who, after feeling the flesh of the antelope, began examining the signs of the trail.

"Not very far 'way," continued Red Lightning, when he returned.

The redskin at once made a small fire, by which enough of the meat was cooked to supply them for the day.

Having despatched a hasty meal, and leaving the exhausted horses, with plenty of food and water around them, Fred and his companion continued the journey on foot at an easy gait, which was not accelerated by Red Lightning's next assertion:

"Horses very tired. We very near them!"

They were now traveling through an undulating country, and though Fred, with his glasses, could see nothing, everything indicated that the bandits were but a mile or two ahead.

A couple of hours later they came to a steep, high hill, and on reaching the brow a startling scene met their gaze.

At the foot of the hill extended a broad plain, and here, not a mile away, were the bandits!

They had come to a halt and were drawn up in a hollow square, in the center of which were four riderless horses, evidently the pack horses. Through his glasses Fred could see all plainly.

The cause of the halt was a body of horsemen approaching from the south, directly in the path of the bandits.

It flashed across Fred that this was another posse, who, warned by telegraph of the route of the robbers, had been waiting to intercept them.

Counting both parties, the young Cowboy Chief saw that the bandits numbered twenty-five, while the posse had about fifty.

When the posse was within three hundred yards of them, one of the road robbers gave an order; instantly ten of their number formed an inner square around the pack horses, while another, their leader, rode out a little to one side of the band.

"Now, Jose, look sharp for the signal!" cried Jim Dalton—for one of the dread Dalton brothers he was—and dashed forward to meet the advancing horsemen.

The Mexican addressed as Jose, sitting motionless as a statue, with his deadly rifle lying carelessly across his knees, merely nodded his head, and calmly continued to puff away at his cigarette.

The sudden advance of the bandit leader halted the posse, and stopping within speaking distance of them, Jim Dalton called out:

"Who commands that party?"

"I do, I reckon," replied a big, brawny fellow, advancing from the front of the posse.

"Well, gentlemen, you don't look over friendly. May I ask what you're after?"

The bandit leader spoke pleasantly, which caused the brawny sheriff (for such he was) to advance toward him, as it was intended he should, saying:

"I don't git ye, stranger. What did ye say?"

Jim repeated his question.

"Wall, I reckon thet thar crowd's 'bout the size o' what we're after," replied the sheriff, with a grin.

"Sheriff, I suppose?"

"Thet's what I be, young feller—" Sheriff Reynolds!"

"Glad to know, sheriff," returned the bandit, raising his hat.

That was the signal, and the sheriff's death-warrant, for a rifle cracked, the sheriff toppled from his saddle and his frightened horse galloped away, dragging his lifeless body by one foot, which had caught in the stirrup.

Morales' shot was the signal, in turn, for a charge by a dozen of the bandits. Headed by Jim Dalton, they dashed into the posse, delivering two deadly volleys at short range before the latter had recovered from the surprise.

This posse, however, was built of better stuff than the first one, under Sheriff Maguire, and fought bravely and with determination, but at great disadvantage.

They had lost their leader at the outset, had been surprised by two terrific volleys, and divided by the bandits, who charged them in a wedge-shaped body, the apex of which was one of the finest pistol-shots in the world.

Once divided, they were under the deadly fire of Morales and six other expert riflemen, who, sitting at ease two hundred yards away, picked them off quickly and surely.

Man and horse dropped like grain before the sickle under this deadly sharp-shooting, while the bandits in the center fought in comparative security.

Under such circumstances, the battle could not last long. The deadly revolvers in the center, and the more deadly rifles on the flanks were too much for flesh and blood, and when reduced to ten men, the survivors of the posse endeavored to get away.

But it was not the intention of the outlaws to allow any one to return this time. The whole country south would be up to meet or follow them if they did so; so, one by one, they were shot down as they fled. "Phew! But those were plucky devils!" exclaimed Dick Dalton, another of the terrible brothers, when the last of the posse had fallen.

"I tell you, Jim," he continued, wiping the perspiration from his brow, "if it wasn't for your idea of getting the sheriff out first, we'd have had a tough job!"

Jim smiled, and his brother replied:

"Thou art right! See what it is to have one big head in the family."

"How do we stand?" asked Frank, the third of the trio, interrupting them.

A hasty investigation proved that the posse had not fought in vain. Three of the bandits were killed and six more wounded, two of them so badly that recovery was out of the question.

The watching Cowboy Chief, from the hilltop, saw these two carried to some trees a short distance from the scene of the conflict, and then, to his great joy, saw the road terrors preparing to camp.

"We've got them now, Lightning," he exclaimed. "Bill and the boys will be here before long, and we can attack them to-night."

"Mebbe!" returned Red Lightning, doubtfully.

"Why, don't you think they'll get here before night?" asked Fred.

"No can tell what happen," was the reply.

And it was "mebbe," for night came, and no Hawkins with his boys.

Fred and his companion had moved up closer to the bandits, who, just as darkness came on, began to prepare to break camp.

"Lightning, we can't wait for them! We must follow this crowd, for they'll cross to-night. What can keep Bill?"

Knowing Hawkins so well, the boy chief was greatly troubled over his non-appearance, but there was no help for it;

so, when the outlaws started, he and Red Lightning followed at a short distance behind.

As the bandits traveled slowly, carrying two of their wounded companions, the two trailers had no difficulty in following them.

About midnight the Rio Grande was reached, and here the bandits camped again. One of the wounded men had died.

"If we could only stop them now from crossing to-morrow morning," muttered Fred.

"Why no stampede horses?" asked the Comanche.

"The very thing! Lightning, you are a jewel! But, can you do it?"

The darkness hid the Indian's smile, as he replied:

"No trouble. Try in little while."

Creeping stealthily in the long grass, Fred and his companion soon arrived within a short distance of the bandit camp.

Only one man was on guard, and he half asleep.

"Go back—far!" ordered Red Lightning. "Me fix him and get horses," pointing to the guard, sitting on a stump on the other side of the fire, and between the men and the horses.

Red Lightning's rifle and bow had been left some distance back, at the foot of a tree. To this spot Fred crept back, after giving the Indian one of his revolvers.

Fred had scarcely reached the tree, when he heard a blood-curdling war-cry, followed by a half-dozen pistol shots, which assured him that Red Lightning had accomplished the stampede.

He had climbed the tree, with the Indian's rifle and bow slung over his shoulder, and, a minute later, could see the horses flying across the prairie, urged by an occasional yell or shot from Red Lightning.

There was no moonlight, but, by the light of their fire, the young Cowboy Chief could see the bandits starting up in alarm, while three of them hurried to the spot where the sentry had been posted.

He saw them raise the body; thought, and rightly, too, that it bore no scalp, and shuddered.

The watcher now understood what Red Lightning meant by "fixing" the sentry.

"Blast that red imp's soul!" exclaimed Jim Dalton, as he picked up the dead camp-guard.

"Yes; and blast that fool there, who let him get away with our horses! Now we're stuck!" rejoined another of the brothers.

The third man was Frank Dalton, who quietly added:

"There's no use swearing at anybody now. Let's see what Morales has to say about our chances of borrowing enough horses to get across."

Morales took the loss of the horses quite calmly, and assured them there would be no trouble in replacing them.

"I'm glad," he said, "for it will give me an opportunity to see a lady who may be persuaded to accompany us. Ten miles from here we will be able to get all the horses we want, but we may have to burn some of the town, or all of it, to get them!"

Ten minutes later a dozen of the outlaws, headed by Jim Dalton and Morales, left the camp and proceeded toward the little town from which the second unfortunate posse had started the previous morning.

After watching them a few minutes, the young spy forgot his prudence, and, leaving the redskin's rifle and bow behind him, crept back to the bandit camp to hear, if possible, what they proposed doing.

CHAPTER IV.

CAPTURED AND RESCUED.

The Cowboy Chief had crept to the edge of the camp through the long grass without being observed, but, in moving around to get within earshot of Dick and Frank Dalton, had got directly in the path of one of the outlaws returning from the party that had gone for horses.

This man fell right on top of Fred, and the shout he uttered brought the whole band to his assistance.

"Who the deuce have we got now?" exclaimed Dick Dalton, looking at the prisoner curiously.

Fred, after the first effort to escape, had made no resistance, and now stood in a rather close circle of the ruffians, more an object of curiosity than a prisoner.

"One of the natives, I guess! What were you after, my boy?"

Instead of answering, Frank Dalton, who had put the question, Fred made a sudden plunge through his unsuspecting guards, knocking one senseless with the butt of his revolver.

He was twenty yards away, flying through the darkness, before the gang recovered from their surprise and started in pursuit.

Young and fleet of foot, Fred would have easily distanced his pursuers, who could scarcely see him, had not his foot caught in the long grass and caused him to fall.

Before he could get on his feet the outlaws were upon him, but this time he was not captured without a bloody struggle.

Three times he fired, and each time a man fell, before a blow from a rifle butt brought him to the earth.

At first it was supposed Fred Campbell was dead, and that alone saved his life, for the ruffians were furious over the loss of their comrades.

"By George! Three for one, and that one a boy, don't pay!" exclaimed Dick, as Fred fell.

"Not much," returned Frank. "But, is he dead?"

In the darkness no one had seen the blow dealt, and it was, of course, supposed that Fred had been shot.

As Frank Dalton asked the question, he stooped over Fred and examined him.

"Dick!" he called, in a low tone; and, when his brother came to him, continued: "He's only stunned. Lend me your flask. We must find out who he is and what he was after."

A few drops of liquor brought Fred to consciousness, and he was led back to the camp.

Disarmed and brought into the light of the camp fire, Fred was now an object of wrath as well as curiosity.

"Who are you and what brought you here?" demanded Frank Dalton, sternly.

"My name is Campbell. I was creeping up to see what you were doing."

Fred said this boldly, and it made a good impression; its very frankness was in his favor.

"What for did you want to see what we were doing? Are you from the town?"

Frank asked these questions in a more friendly tone, for he felt sorry for the youthful prisoner, who, he believed, had been actuated by boyish curiosity.

"Yes, I'm from the town," replied Fred, adding: "And I came to see just what you were up to."

"Well, my boy, I'm sorry you made that balk, for they'll make you pay for those dead men. However, I'll try to get you out of it easy; they were only Greasers, anyhow."

The low, earnest tone in which this was said, and the scowling, vengeful looks of the bandits, showed Fred the tight place into which his folly had gotten him, but

he had great faith in Lightning and Hawkins—if he escaped immediate death.

As Frank turned away two of the bandits seized and bound the young man, but it was scarcely done before Jim Dalton and Morales, leading the horse-stealing division, rode into camp, with a large number of horses.

Seated on one of the horses was a pretty girl of fifteen, and in front of Morales a young and beautiful woman of about twenty-five.

As soon as the horsemen reached the camp, Frank Dalton entered into conversation with his brother and Morales, and the young prisoner heard Morales say:

"Shoot him! Shoot him!"

"Nonsense! Give him a chance; he's only a boy!" protested Frank.

"But we've no time to waste! Half the town will be after us inside of an hour! Come! I'll settle him!" and the Mexican rode toward Fred, revolver in hand.

"Stop that! If you shoot, I'll shoot!"

'Twas Frank Dalton who spoke, and the Mexican pulled up short and looked back, to find the muzzle of a revolver pointed fair at his head.

"Do you sacrifice friends for enemies?" Morales cried. "I have but to call, and you and yours will be slaughtered!"

"Not much! Your men have not arrived, to begin with. And, even if they had, we could lick the whole lot of ye!" cried Jim Dalton, now riding forward, a revolver in either hand.

"Stop that, Jim," interposed his brother, and then addressing Morales, continued:

"You must remember, Jose, that until we reach the Rio Grande, I am in command!"

"Very well. What shall be done with him?" asked the Mexican, sullenly.

"Bring him with us. Then we can give him a trial—a fair one, too, by George!" was the reply.

Morales made no response; the rest of the band mounted; several horses were loaded with the bags of silver, and then the cavalcade started off at a rapid gait.

Fred, bound to a horse, was guarded by three of the Mexicans, and in this manner they proceeded until dawn.

At dawn the party halted in a grove near the banks of the Rio Grande, for breakfast, and here Fred recognized the two females as the wife and sister-in-law of the engineer killed on the night the train was held up.

Mrs. Cheatham's face wore a cold, stony expression, while her sister's countenance bore traces of weeping.

Fred knew Mrs. Cheatham quite well, having met her many times in San Antonio with her husband, but her sister he had seen only two or three times.

The three prisoners were placed a little apart from the others, and Fred was greatly surprised to find that it was the younger woman only who appeared to recognize him.

"Don't you remember me, Mrs. Cheatham?" he asked, in a low voice.

"Oh, Mr. Campbell, I'm afraid she does not know any one!" exclaimed the young girl, whose name was Rita Young.

Her sister had not replied to the question—did not even appear to have heard it.

"He—that Morales—burned our house and seized us last night," continued Rita, "and I'm afraid it's driven her crazy. Poor Mr. Cheatham's body had only been brought home at noon, and—and—it must have been burned up!"

The poor girl ended with a sob, and began to weep just as Morales approached.

He glanced savagely at Fred, but changed instantly on approaching Mrs. Cheatham.

"Well, how do you feel this morning? Tired, I suppose. But, never mind; it will be over soon," he said, soothingly.

"Oh! I can't believe you!" exclaimed

Mrs. Cheatham, pettishly, and then, after a moment, asked, with a half smile:

"How did you know Jim was dead?"

Morales stared at her in surprise. He had expected tears, pleadings, reproaches—even abuse.

"I was there!" he replied.

"Ah! And you killed him? Oh! you needn't say no! I know you, Jose!" she said, with a cunning look, and the same queer smile.

Just then Morales was called by Jim Dalton, and, with a muttered curse at the interruption, he turned and left her, saying:

"I shall return in a few minutes!"

But he did not return, and soon one of the band brought some breakfast, and while eating it Fred learned from Rita Young that Morales had once been a suitor for the hand of her sister.

While listening to this, he saw an earnest, and, at times an angry conversation being carried on between Morales and the Dalton boys, but this soon ceased; then the bags of bar silver were placed upon the horses and they were led away by the four leaders.

Half an hour later they returned, but the horses carried no bags.

The three captives were sitting at the foot of a large tree, under the watchful eye of one of the Mexicans, and Fred's heart sank when he saw the horses returning without the bags.

"They have buried the treasure!" he thought, mournfully.

Just as the thought passed through his mind their guard fell forward on his face with an arrow through his throat!

Fred's heart leaped. Lightning was at hand!

The next instant the cord binding his wrists was severed, and a knife placed in his hand.

"Cut quick! Then come behind tree!"

It was the well-known voice of Lightning, and Fred quickly obeyed.

"Friends are near!" the young man explained to Rita as he crawled away.

Once around the tree Fred met Lightning, who, without speaking, hurried him away. They ran in almost a semi-circle, and covered fully a mile before the Comanche came to a halt.

About that moment Fred's escape was discovered, but when Morales heard from Rita that Fred had been gone nearly half an hour, he said with an ugly oath:

"It's no use. Let him go! We must get across the river at once!"

"You are right, Morales!" said Frank Dalton, "and look sharp about it, too! It may be only one man, as your men say it is, from the tracks, but you can't be too careful. If we meet your men, we'll send them after you. Good-by! We've got to skip now!"

And, with a wave of their hats, the Dalton contingent rode off toward the northwest, the saddlebags of each of the seven men well filled with gold and greenbacks, which were never recovered, and with that part of the bandit gang we are done.

Meantime Fred and Lightning had proceeded more slowly to the bank of the river, and in a short time saw the Mexicans crossing.

"The Americans have gone!" exclaimed Fred, as he watched; and then, seeing no extra load carried by any of the horsemen, continued, "They've buried the whole of it, except the greenbacks, and will come back another time to divide!"

As we know, he was somewhat in error.

When the last of the Mexicans had disappeared among the trees on the other side, Fred asked Lightning regarding Hawkins and his men, but the Indians knew nothing of them.

"Left sign for them to come on; then follow you all time," he explained.

Fred sighed wearily, anxiously. Something must have happened his comrades.

"Well, let's look about their camp; we may find out something," he said; but the only thing they found was some scraps of cooked antelope, which Lightning ate greedily.

"The treasure is somewhere about," Fred declared, after Lightning had finished eating, "but we have no time, now, to look for it. We must go on and try to rescue those poor women."

The Indian nodded and arose to his feet.

"Leave sign?" he queried.

"I'm afraid it's no use, but I suppose I might as well," replied Fred, despondently.

"What that?" exclaimed Lightning, pointing in the direction from which they had come.

Turning, Fred saw two men approaching, one on foot supporting another on horseback, whose horse was moving at an easy gait.

They were too far away to be recognizable. Indeed, the rider's face was almost on the neck of his horse; but, as they came nearer, Fred recognized the pedestrian as Captain Morgan's Chinese cook, and a sudden chill came over him as he advanced to meet them.

"My God! It's Bill!" he exclaimed, when they met.

And it was Bill, all bloody and bandaged, and almost unconscious.

CHAPTER V.

HAWKINS' STORY AND FRED IN A FIX.

"What has happened? Where did you find him, and where are the others?" demanded the Cowboy Chief, as they lifted Bill from the saddle and laid him on the grass near the brook.

"Find him way back velly sick. Ev'lybody much lot dead!"

Fred groaned, and, stooping over Hawkins, washed some blood from his face.

This seemed to revive the wounded man, who opened his eyes, and their weary, pained expression changed instantly to one of joy on beholding Fred.

"Got thar, Fred!" he said, with a ghastly smile.

"Don't talk, Bill! Try to rest a little," returned Fred. "You can tell us about it later!"

It was more weakness from loss of blood than anything else that troubled Bill, and his iron constitution, aided by Lightning's healing salves, and the Chinaman's strengthening broth, enabled him, after two hours' rest, to relate what had happened.

"About an hour after ye left, we war attacked by a gang o' greasers 'n' redskins—'bout a hundred. They stampeded our hosses, but we give 'em a good fight—killed more'n half of 'em, I reckon. Anyhow, jest ez I dropped, the skunks rid off like ez if the devil wuz after 'em!"

Bill paused, as if reluctant to proceed, and Fred asked:

"And the rest of the boys, Bill?"

"Dead!" replied Bill, with a groan, and after a few minutes' sorrowful silence, continued:

"I crawled 'round when I come to m'self, but found only eight of 'em. Then I flopped over ag'in, 'n' Chin-Chin come along 'n' found me. So we come along, 'n' I'm here!"

"Me velly good doctor!" added Chin Chin, regarding Bill complacently, at which Lightning grinned. Bill said "Scat!" and the poor Chinaman looked both frightened and hurt.

"Shall we send him home?" asked Fred.

"No; bring him along. He kin cook, anyhow, 'n' if it comes to fightin', he kin run like a scart fox!" returned Bill.

So Chin Chin formed one of the rescuing party—and a very important one,

too, although not consulted in the matter. Lightning killed a couple of rabbits and a bird, and while these were being cooked, and Fred was relating his story to Bill, the redskin went off toward the river.

Chin Chin had just finished cooking when the Indian returned, and, taking a seat near the others, began eating.

"Found anythin', Lightnin'?" asked Bill.

"Canoe!" was the response.

"Good boy! The very thing!" exclaimed Fred. "We can lead your horse, Bill, and you can ride again on the other side. Wasn't it a lucky find, though?"

"I guess he didn't hev t' look much, eh, Lightnin'?" said Bill, with a grin.

The Indian grinned in return, but said nothing.

Bill having declared that he was strong enough, they proceeded to the river, where a large canoe with two paddles, was lying tied to a tree.

Fred and Lightning paddled as fast as the swimming powers of Bill's horse would permit, and they were soon standing on Mexican soil, waiting for the Indian to return from hiding the canoe.

Then they took up the trail—Lightning leading at an easy gait.

They finally halted for the night, when Red Lightning announced that they had almost reached Morales' headquarters, and would have to go slowly and carefully on the morrow.

Early on the morrow they took up the march, and about noon the Indian called out:

"There is Morales!"

They had been traveling through a dense woods, and were about to enter an open though mountainous country, when Lightning stopped the party with the above words.

On the summit of a high, steep hill, about a quarter-mile away, was a large one-story wooden building, lounging about which were a number of Mexicans. Evidently a stronghold, which only a strong force could take.

"How the deuce are we going to get to that house, Bill?" asked Fred, looking from Hawkins to Lightning.

"Try it at night," replied Bill; "but ther's sure to be plenty o' eyes on watch, even then, eh, Lightnin'?"

Lightning nodded assent.

Concealed among the trees, the rescuers watched the movements of the Mexicans until about three o'clock, when Hawkins suggested that Lightning should try to get something for the party to eat.

Bill was beginning to feel like himself again, and his appetite was returning.

Taking only his long bow and arrows, the Indian went away, returning in a short time with a couple of large rabbits, which he handed to Fred.

"Here, Chin Chin! Take these back a little further and cook them!" ordered Fred. "Make no smoke."

Chin Chin went back about fifty yards, where he built a small dry bush fire, and, having seen this properly started, the others resumed their watch on the Mexicans.

They had been thus engaged about fifteen minutes, when they were startled by hearing Chin Chin cry:

"Hullah! Hullah! Me got 'em!"

Turning quickly, they were amazed to see the little Chinaman engaged in a desperate struggle with a brawny Mexican.

The two were rolling over and over around the fire—first one and then the other on top, the Mexican endeavoring to reach his knife, and the Chinaman skillfully preventing him.

How long Chin Chin would have been successful in doing this it is impossible to say, but on the appearance of Fred

and the others the Mexican stopped struggling.

He seemed petrified with fear on beholding the big Comanche, and Red Lightning's face wore a grim smile as he noted the terror of the Greaser.

"He is Manuel. He next captain. Was captain one time!" the Indian informed the group.

"How can we find out if Morales is up there now?" asked Fred.

Lightning repeated the question to the Mexican, who replied that Morales was in the house, and had brought home two female prisoners.

"Ask him how he himself got down here without being seen," urged Fred, his suspicions aroused.

To this the Mexican replied that he had been away since morning, and was returning home when he accidentally stumbled across Chin Chin cooking.

"Tie him up! We'll have to keep him now, though I don't know what to do with him."

The Mexican seemed grateful to Fred for this order, and made no resistance when Bill securely bound his hands and feet.

Hardly had this been done when a dozen Mexicans left the house and came tearing down the hill at breakneck speed!

"Kick that fire out!" cried Bill, and cutting the cords about their prisoner's feet, hurried him into the woods and out of the probable path of the rapidly approaching bandits.

A path led through the wood to the river, and they had hardly got out of sight before the bandits went dashing by, shouting and laughing.

One cry from the prisoner would have brought him assistance, but he knew it would be his death warrant, for Lightning stood beside him with a bowie knife ready for use.

When the Greasers had passed there was a general sigh of relief from the little party, and they moved back to the edge of the woods.

"How many more up there?" asked Fred.

"As many more as you have just seen," replied Manuel.

About ten o'clock that night, Lightning left them to see what he could learn about the house.

There was no moon, and as the Indian disappeared in the darkness, Bill declared it was just the night for the rescue of the women.

All lights had been extinguished in the stronghold long before Lightning started. Solemn stillness dwelt over all, and, sitting watching and listening, the silence became oppressive.

"I can't stand this any longer, Bill! I'm going to take a walk 'round and—"

There came the report of a gun, followed by several cries; lights flashed in and about the house, and by their light men could be seen running in various directions.

Lightning had carried no rifle, and Fred exclaimed:

"He's been discovered! That shot was meant for him!"

"Fraid yer right, pard!" returned Bill, and then both relapsed into silence. Chin Chin, meanwhile, slept, blissfully unconscious of any trouble, not five yards away, alongside the prisoner.

A half-hour passed, and both watchers became very restless. The lights in the house had again disappeared; everything about was in darkness, and yet Red Lightning had not returned.

"Let's do something, Bill!" urged the young leader. "I'm going to take a look around."

"Hold on a minit! I'll go, too, if ve'll wait till I wake Chin!" rejoined Hawkins.

The Chinaman was awakened and informed of their purpose, after which they started, but, as soon as they began the ascent, Fred proposed they should "spread" and go in different directions.

"I'll take the right and you the left, Bill," he said, "and we can meet at the house!"

They separated—each making a half-circle up the hill.

Fred reached the house in safety. No guard was visible, and he crept around to the back to meet Hawkins, but just as he turned the corner came plump into the hands of Morales himself.

CHAPTER VI.

THE TORTURE SENTENCE.

The encounter between the boy captain and Morales was so unexpected that for a moment neither made a movement, but the appearance of two guards, making the rounds in an opposite direction, roused Fred to a sense of his double danger, and he made a dart to pass Morales.

The latter carried in his hand a long, heavy club, and, as Fred passed him, he hurled this with such force and accuracy that he brought the fleeing youth to the earth, senseless.

Fred recovered consciousness to find himself lying on the floor, surrounded by a crowd of as villainous looking scoundrels as ever lived.

"So, my fine lad, I've got you again, and this time you won't get away. Get up!"

It was Morales who spoke, and Fred arose.

"Now, what have you to say for yourself? Speak quick! My men want revenge for their comrades. Do you not?"

A hoarse murmur of approval was their answer, and for a moment Fred gave himself up as lost, but, suddenly, Manuel, the prisoner, occurred to him, and, putting on a bold front, he replied:

"You can kill me, if you wish, but what of your lieutenant, Manuel? My death means his death."

"Manuel?" exclaimed Morales, in surprise. "What do you mean?"

"Just what I say! As you treat me, so will Manuel be treated."

There was a hurried consultation among the bandits, and, feeling quite safe for the present, Fred simply smiled and shook his head when Morales asked:

"Where is Manuel?"

The consultation was resumed, and, a few minutes later, Morales said:

"Put him with the woman, but bind him and the young one!"

And to Fred, as he was being led away:

"We will find Manuel before twenty-four hours, and then we will play the Indian with you!"

With this significant reminder and threat, Fred was led away to a room at the rear of the house.

It was a large apartment, outside the door of which a sentry was stationed. It contained a rough-looking bed, upon which Fred threw himself in obedience to a sign from the Mexican who accompanied him.

Binding the young American's feet, the Mexican looked rather disappointedly around the room, and then longingly toward a smaller inner chamber, after which he left the prisoner to his reflections.

Scarcely had the Mexican left him, when Fred was startled to find Rita Young standing at his bedside.

The Mexican either had forgotten his orders, or, thinking her asleep, had not cared to disturb her. He was quite a young man, and had been struck by Rita's beauty.

"You were to have been bound," began Fred.

"Hush! There is a guard outside. If he hears us talking he will enter, and then

I cannot help you. So listen, but do not speak.

"We heard the noise when you were captured, and I listened to their conversation. I understand Spanish enough to know that they intend to hunt for Manuel until to-morrow night, and then, if not found, they will torture you until you tell where he is. Then they will kill you. Even now they are hunting for Manuel, and if they find him before morning—"

"Then they'll finish me at once, I suppose!"

Rita bowed, and continued:

"But you must not wait for morning. You must escape before daylight and get back to warn your friends, and try to rescue us, if possible! My sister has a knife. I will try to get it and cut these cords."

As Rita finished speaking and turned toward the inner room, the door was suddenly thrown open, and Morales stood on the threshold.

"Carajos! Why are you not bound?" he exclaimed, in angry surprise.

Striding over to the prisoner, and drawing a revolver as he approached the bed, Morales examined Fred's bonds.

He had evidently expected to find the prisoner wholly or partially unbound, for, turning a suspicious look upon Rita, he said:

"You were about to release the prisoner."

"Had the thought occurred to me, I could have done so long ago!" returned Rita, sharply, as though angered by his suspicion.

"How is it you are here, then, and not bound, as I ordered?"

"I am not responsible for your orders," returned Rita. "How was I to know who was here?"

The girl acted her part well, and the show of anger did much to allay the Mexican's suspicions.

"Keep your own room, and have nothing to do with the prisoner, for if he should escape it will be bad for you!"

With this Morales turned toward the door.

"Stop!" cried Rita, and as he turned in surprise, she continued:

"Either remove this man, or lock that door when I enter the room. I will not be held responsible for your prisoner!"

Looking at her keenly, he was about to turn away again, saying:

"No; I shall trust you—"

But Rita insisted that the door should be locked. This was done, and Morales left the room.

The young American was greatly surprised at Rita's action, but he soon had an explanation of her conduct.

Morales had been gone a half hour, and Fred was about falling asleep, when he was suddenly roused by a sharp click, like the snapping of a bolt. Then he saw the door of Rita's room open cautiously, and the girl came forth, a knife in her hand.

Approaching Fred, she severed his bonds and then motioned him to follow her.

In the inner room Fred saw Mrs. Cheatham asleep in one corner, and directly facing him an open, unbarred window, sufficiently large to pass through.

"There! Go as quick as possible!" whispered Rita, pointing to the window.

"But you? He will wreak his vengeance on you!"

"Oh, no! The key is on the other side, and he will think he failed to close the door tight enough for the bolt to catch."

"How did you open it?"

"With the knife. The lock is on this side. But, hurry away, or he may come again! Don't forget us!"

"I never shall while I live!" replied the young captain, as he climbed through the window.

Hanging halfway out, Fred heard some

one approaching. In an instant he dropped to the ground, but in doing so one foot struck a large stone, and he rolled over, with an involuntary cry of pain.

Before he could recover himself the patrol was upon him and had pinned him to the earth. The fellow was a man of tremendous strength, and Fred was fast being choked to death, when, suddenly, the pressure on his throat relaxed; then he was picked up and carried around to the other side of the house.

"No speak!" whispered the rescuer, and Fred instantly recognized the voice. It was Red Lightning!

The Indian hurried along, carrying Fred as easily as a mother would a child, and stopped just before reaching the corner and set Fred on his feet.

Motioning Fred to watch his side, while he went around to the other, the red chief disappeared from view.

He was gone fully five minutes, and Fred was beginning to grow anxious, when the tall form of the Indian appeared at the other end of the building on his side.

Red Lightning motioned him to approach, and on doing so led him to the other side of the building.

Lying under the window through which the young Cowboy Chief had made his escape, was the guard, bound hand and foot and gagged.

Just why Lightning had not killed the Mexican Fred could not imagine until the Indian asked:

"Go in now for gals, or take him 'way? Two prisoner here—two prisoner us!"

Fred did not hesitate for a moment, but decided to endeavor to rescue the prisoners; so, stepping on Lightning's back, and thence to his broad shoulders, Fred leaned through the little window.

The door leading to the larger room was closed, and all was dark within.

"Rita! Rita!" he called, softly.

"What is it? Who are you?" asked the girl, springing up and running to the window.

"It's I—Fred Campbell! I—"

"Hush! Some one is coming in! Fly! Fly for your life!" exclaimed Rita, interrupting him.

Fred had himself heard somebody unlocking the outer door, and did not need the warning, for at the same moment Lightning fairly pulled him from the window, saying:

"Must run quick now! More coming!"

Fred and his companion at once started off at top speed around the house, but too late for escape, for they had been seen by the approaching party, which was a part of the gang that had passed through the woods the previous day, and, in accordance with their custom, had divided at the foot of the hill and were approaching the house from opposite directions.

Neither Lightning nor Fred knew anything of this custom, and when they wheeled round the corner to make a dash for the woods, both were thunderstruck to find they were almost face to face with another half-dozen mounted Mexicans.

CHAPTER VII.

A FIGHT FOR LIFE.

It was a case of the "devil or the deep sea!" Surely enough, half a dozen yelling fiends, front and rear, and as many more coming from the house, left little choice for Fred and Lightning.

"Shoot quick! You take right—I take left!"

They were now close to the second party of Mexicans, and Fred began shooting, using the revolver which the Indian had taken from the Mexican guard.

Shots had been fired at the fugitives, but, as the two parties closed in, the fear

of injuring their comrades compelled them to cease shooting.

Fred and Lightning were within twenty yards of the bandits, when they began firing—each taking an outside rider.

A man dropped at each end of the Mexican line, and before they recovered from their surprise the fugitives had fired again, dismounting two more, and were dashing down the hillside again, side by side.

The first party of bandits had almost ridden down their comrades, and the delay that ensued gave Lightning time to reach the edge of the woods.

There were fifteen or twenty in both parties, and, as Fred ran along, he said to Lightning:

"If we could get around to the back of the house now, we wouldn't find many to bother us!"

Just then a rifle shot rang out from behind, and Fred instantly declared it was Hawkins who had fired.

"That's Bill!" he exclaimed. "He's in trouble! We must go back and help him."

Fred came to a halt as he spoke, but Red Lightning, catching his arm, urged him on again.

"Bill no fool!" he said. "Not in camp, now. Fire to bring some 'way from us. Go back to house. Safe there for while."

Another rifle shot rang out, followed a couple of minutes later by yet another, each from the same rifle, but in slightly different directions, as though the person firing was moving about.

Satisfied now that Lightning was right, Fred started off again.

They had skirted along the edge of the woods, while the Mexicans had lighted torches and were riding in among the trees, penetrating further and further into the forest.

Seeing the direction the chase was taking, Fred and his companion eased up and proceeded more slowly, still in the shelter of the trees, toward Morales' stronghold.

They were opposite one end of the house, and only about three hundred yards away, when suddenly Rita Young appeared in the doorway.

The moon shining brightly, Fred could see her plainly, looking about as if searching for some one.

Thinking it was for himself, the boy captain ran toward the girl, calling her name, while Lightning, with an angry exclamation, followed.

As soon as Rita noticed his approach she waved her hands, warning Fred back, and darted into the house.

It was too late, however, for, while Fred was standing, staring in surprise at her action, several Mexicans, rushed to the doorway.

The instant the bandits appeared the Indian began firing, and thus covered his companion's retreat until the latter had got a fair start; then he, too, turned and fled.

In his excitement Fred had started back in the same direction he had gone on escaping—which would bring him into the hands of the Greasers again—an error he did not realize until he was at the edge of the woods and saw several horsemen riding toward him, so he had to make a running fight of it—shooting at those in front and taking the chances of being shot from behind.

Suddenly Lightning, who was running parallel with Fred to protect him, saw one of the horsemen raise his revolver to fire at the young American—the horseman almost upon the fleeing youth.

Red Lightning fired at the rider and the Greaser fell from the saddle, and the horse, plunging forward, struck Fred, knocking him down.

Before he could regain his feet half a

dozen of the bandits were upon him, and he heard Morales cry out:

"Carramba! You will not escape me now!"

Looking up, Fred saw the Mexican leader leaning over from the saddle, pointing a revolver directly at his head.

Fred's earthly career must then have ended, but before Morales could pull the trigger Red Lightning bounded into the group and knocked the Mexican leader from his saddle.

Quick to appreciate his opportunity, Fred was on his feet instantly, and then ensued a terrific close-quarter combat—the red chief and his boy brave doing such terrible execution that the dismayed Mexicans turned to fly up the hill.

As they fled Fred noticed that among them was one horse to which a man was strapped, and the thought flashed across him—

"That's Bill!"

But it was too late, the bandits were already almost home.

Fred had received a bullet wound in the calf of the leg, while Lightning had been cut in the arm, but neither wound amounted to much, and, binding them up, Fred and his red Hercules started for the camp—hardly, however, expecting to find any one there.

To their surprise, however, they found Chin Chin lying under a tree, wide awake, for he jumped to his feet the moment they appeared.

"No clome! Me shloot!" he cried, pointing a revolver at them.

"Where is Bill?" asked Fred, without ceremony.

"Him say help you—go way!"

"Poor Bill! They've got him, sure enough, and it will be a tough job to save him. Something must be done at once! They may begin their devilish work of torture any time after daybreak, and that is right here, now!"

The Indian did not reply; he appeared to be buried in thought, and Fred was amazed to hear Chin Chin say:

"Me go get Bill! Him plisner?"

"Yes, he's a prisoner," replied Fred, "but, Great Scott! They'd chew you up, Chin Chin!"

"No hurt him," interposed Lightning, adding, "Him go right in—we watch outside! Shoot every one come out! You one side—me other! Lightning scare them 'fore now!"

"And the prisoner?" asked Fred, too surprised to object.

For answer the Indian arose and, after arousing Manuel, led the way to a point directly back of and almost underneath the house, halting in front of a mass of rocks.

Against the face of the cliff was a massive boulder, but when Lightning placed his hand on this it swung back, as if on a pivot, revealing a large hole, capable of sheltering several people.

The Indian then explained his scheme—to leave the prisoner there—to send the Chinaman out on his mission, while the two fighters took position to act as seemed best.

A little spring bubbled in one corner of the diminutive cave, and after unloosing the prisoner, Chin Chin started directly for the robber stronghold.

Fred and Lightning left shortly after—the latter having turned the stone into its original position.

The house was in the center of a half-circle, the edge of which was the woods, and the back the cliff in which Manuel was concealed.

Skirting along the woods to reach the southern point of the horseshoe, Fred could watch Chin Chin's arrival and reception at the house.

Several Mexicans were loitering about the door, who watched the approaching

Chinaman with evident curiosity, and before he arrived at the summit several more had been called from within.

The young cowboy chief could see the Chinaman undergo an examination, which, through his glasses, he saw was a humorous, joking one, and shortly after Chin Chin disappeared within.

On one side of the house Fred was stationed up in the fork of a tree, and on the other side, Lightning—each about two hundred yards from the house. Of the two, Fred was slightly the nearer.

About a half hour after Chin Chin had reached the bandit stronghold, a man was led out and bound to a post set in the plateau at the back of the house.

It was, as Fred had feared, it would be, Bill Hawkins.

The prisoner was bound to the post and a small, low pile of brushwood was then thrown around at his feet.

One of the bandits stooped to light this brushwood, when—a rifle shot rang out and the bandit fell.

It was Lightning's shot.

A commotion ensued, but, in a minute, another of the band picked up the torch to light the fire.

It was Fred's turn now, and, as the man lifted the torch, he dropped dead in his tracks.

The thoroughly maddened Morales himself then seized the torch to wreak his vengeance, but he, too, dropped, shot through the shoulder by the red chief.

The fall of Morales created a panic, and while some of the band carried him, others released Hawkins and led him toward the house.

Lightning and Fred then began firing from their coverts on those carrying the bandit chief, and, before they reached shelter, four of them had fallen.

When this party had reached the house, Fred and his red comrade came from their cover and both hurried to the cave.

To their surprise they found the heavy boulder turned back and the cave was empty.

The prisoner had escaped!

That meant death to both Hawkins and poor Chin Chin.

CHAPTER VIII.

A DOUBLE ESCAPE.

"Good Heavens! Lightning!" exclaimed the Cowboy Chief. "He's gone! He's escaped!"

Red Lightning simply nodded, and said:

"Get him back to-night, or get Bill!"

"And the Chinaman?"

"Him too!" returned the Indian.

All day long they watched, keeping well out of the way of the bandits, who now were searching for them.

About nine o'clock that night, Fred and Lightning left the cave, and, crawling cautiously through the grass, soon came within a short distance of the stronghold.

Several Mexicans were lounging about, but soon began to disappear within, and as the last went in Chin Chin came out.

The Chinaman stood in the moonlight, looking about him, and, after a minute's observation, walked directly to the covert of Fred and Lightning, and, pausing within a few yards of them, spoke:

"Bill and gals safe 'nough! Sabe?"

"Where is Bill?" asked Fred.

"Samee place with gals!"

"All right, Chin! Look out for yourself!" said Fred, and the Chinaman returned to the house, while back to the cave again went Fred and Lightning, to remain until morning; but, long before daylight, the quick ear of the Indian caught the noise of a dozen men, who, cautiously as they approached, kicked over several stones before reaching the large boulder.

"Danger!" whispered Red Lightning, shaking Fred.

In an instant Fred was on his feet, both he and Lightning watching for the moment the boulder should be turned.

There seemed to be some difficulty about this; then the listeners heard some one call out:

"Manuel! Manuel! The cursed stone won't move!"

A hasty examination proved this to be the truth, and, throwing aside all attempt at concealment, Manuel called out to those within:

"A Dios, gentlemen! Happy dreams to you, but don't forget that the stone is off the pivot, and you will die of starvation!"

Not a sound had been made by either of the imprisoned men which would indicate that they were in the cavern, and as Manuel moved away this seemed to occur to the Mexican; so calling one of his men, he directed him to return to the cavern and listen for any sounds that would indicate the presence of the persons supposed to be within.

The fellow did not like the prospect of lying around the cavern all night, and so returned to the stone angrily and noisily.

"Curse you!" he cried, kicking at the boulder in senseless rage. "But for you—"

The revolving stone had been chocked by a small fragment of itself, and when the bandit kicked he had removed this, with the result that the huge stone swung round from the force of the blow.

"Carajo! It is open! I must tell Manuel!" and started away, but had not gone twenty feet when Lightning's resistless grip was on him and he was dragged back, trembling with terror, to the cave.

"We find out 'bout Bill, now!" remarked the chief, as he placed the Mexican on the cavern floor.

"Make fire now—no danger," he added, and in a few minutes he had a small pile of dry wood burning beside the big stone.

It was the light the Indian wanted; he wished to see the prisoner's face while talking to him, and, also, to be himself seen.

When the fire blazed up and the captive saw Lightning, he looked terror-stricken.

"How long you keep prisoner for torture?" demanded the Indian.

"To-morrow morning," replied the Mexican.

"Is Morales much hurt?" asked Fred.

"Yes; his arm was shattered, but he will not delay for that. He is going to be married to-morrow night!"

"Phew!" whistled Fred, looking at Lightning; "what shall we do, chief?"

Lightning motioned him to come outside, and then announced:

"We go now. Leave him here," and turning the stone against the entrance, they at once started for the house on the hilltop, but quickly paused on beholding first a man and then a woman coming out through the window by which Fred had escaped.

It was too dark to distinguish who they were until they were quite close; then it was seen to be Chin Chin and Rita.

"Where is your sister?" demanded the young chief.

"She would not come," replied Rita, with a sob. "When I spoke of escape she bade me leave, but said she would not go herself. She is really insane, although Morales will not see it, and she is to marry him to-morrow."

"Marry him?" echoed Fred.

"Yes; but he had better beware, for it is only a part of some insane scheme of vengeance," returned the weeping girl. "I tried to warn him, but he only laughed at me, and in return said there would be two marriages instead of one—that he had promised me to Manuel, his half-brother. That is why I left to-night."

They all proceeded to the cavern, and the latter part of Rita's story was told in the hearing of the prisoner, who, when she finished, exclaimed angrily:

"Ah, the traitor! That was why I was left behind!"

All turned in surprise, and looked at the prisoner.

"Yes," he continued. "I admired the young senorita, and Jose Morales promised if I could gain her consent she should be my bride."

"And he tricked you?"

"He did; but, if you will release me, I will help you, and thus be revenged upon him!"

"What can you do?"

"I will report that you are still in the cavern or not, as you wish. Then, if I can get a chance, I will release your friend."

Lightning shook his head doubtfully; he put no faith in the Mexican, but Fred firmly believed the fellow was eager to get even with Morales, so he decided to release him.

"Me go back too," said Chin Chin, as the Mexican started to depart.

"Back again? Why, they'll kill you!" exclaimed Fred, in astonishment.

"No 'fraid," returned the Celestial, calmly, as he joined the Greaser.

"Now, Lightning, what's the programme?" asked Fred.

"Stay here little while. Then go up for Bill. Gal stay here until come back."

Everything being quiet and dark about the house above, Fred and his companion started out, having first adjusted the stone at the mouth of the cavern.

Chin Chin had informed them that Bill had been removed to the large room into which Fred had been carried while he was unconscious, and to that room he was bound to make his way.

Accordingly, on reaching the window, he jumped on Lightning's broad shoulders and peeped into the women's room.

The room was quite dark, lit only by a streak of light which came from the crack under the door of the next room.

"Mrs. Cheatham! Mrs. Cheatham!" he called, in a low tone, but there was no reply, and after repeating this several times, Fred concluded she, too, had been removed, perhaps to the next room.

He was quickly undeceived on this point, however, as he crawled through the window, for he had scarcely touched the floor when he was caught by the throat and pinned to the wall.

He knew at once that he was in the grasp of the mad woman, and could catch the gleam of the knife in her hand as she raised it to strike him.

For an instant Fred was in the shadow of death, but the knife remained upraised, the fierce clutch on his throat suddenly relaxed, and when the woman possessed of the unnatural strength peculiar to maniacs released him, he sank to the floor to avert her further notice.

Mrs. Cheatham paid no further attention to him, but began pacing the floor muttering loud enough for Fred to hear:

"I was dreaming of to-morrow night. I thought it was my Mexican bridegroom! My bridegroom—ha! ha!" and the laugh-maniacal was at once sickening and pitiful, and Fred shivered as he heard, but remained quiet.

The unfortunate woman paused and sighed deeply, as if very weary, and then threw herself on the bed in the corner.

But a few moments later her deep breathing assured Fred that she was asleep, and, creeping to the door, he listened there intently.

All was still there, so he noiselessly opened the unlocked door and looked into the apartment, and then, seeing no one, he stepped into his recent prison.

Scarcely had he crossed the threshold, however, when, even before turning his head, Fred became aware that a man was standing in one of the doorways, close to the wall.

And that man held a revolver full at the young American's head.

CHAPTER IX.

A RESCUE AND A FLIGHT.

The young cowboy captain was paralyzed by the discovery, but the next instant Chin Chin greeted him with:

"Me on glard; thought you Greasee man," he said, apologetically.

"On guard?" repeated Fred, in surprise.

"Allee samè Melican man," replied the Chinaman, grinning, and then continued:

"Bill outside. No can get him yet. Much lot bandits allee 'lound him."

This was bad news, and when Chin Chin led Fred to the doorway to get a peep at Bill, he saw it was only too true, for Bill, bound hand and foot, was lying on the floor, surrounded by sleeping outlaws.

"No 'fraid! We gettee Bill soon!" Chin Chin confidently asserted. "Sabe? Him 'longside Bill was plisoner at cave. Lilly while him cut Bill free. Then Bill go out like me," and the Chinaman tiptoed across the room as lightly as a cat, but in a manner so comical that Fred smiled, despite his anxiety.

Just then one of the bandits beside Bill sat up and began feeling for something.

Whatever it was he could not find it, and with a look of annoyance he searched about him on the floor.

"Him!" whispered Chin Chin, and at the same time Fred recognized the Mexican he had allowed to go free.

Suddenly the fellow looked up, and, catching sight of Chin Chin, drew his forefinger across his throat.

Fred did not understand him, but the Chinaman did, and drawing his knife, tiptoed across the floor in the same comical, quiet fashion.

Reaching over one of the sleepers, Chin Chin handed the knife to the Mexican, who immediately began cutting Bill's bonds.

At that moment, Fred, hearing some one moving stealthily behind him, turned quickly, filled with alarm lest the mad woman should now appear and ruin everything, but to his intense relief saw the red chief at his back.

Lightning smiled grimly when Fred pointed to the man cutting the cords, but at the same time drew a revolver and motioned Fred to do the same.

Suddenly Chin Chin went down in a heap on the floor, and the Mexican, who had just finished freeing Hawkins, did the same, while the latter, cramped from being tied up, endeavored to arise.

He had gained a sitting position, but on seeing the others drop down, lay back again.

It was too late, however, for Morales, who was restless from the pain of his wounded arm, had opened a door at the other end of the room just as Bill fell back.

He had seen the movement, and became suspicious that all was not right.

Stepping over the sleepers, Morales stooped to examine Bill's bonds, and as he did so, he saw the severed cords.

Bill had anticipated this, and, just as the bandit leader stooped he drew up his knee to his chest, then, shooting out his foot with tremendous force, he sent Morales halfway across the room, where he lay, yelling and cursing, and gasping for breath.

Instantly Bill struck out from the hip,

Lightning began firing, and Fred followed suit.

For a few minutes pandemonium reigned supreme. The air was filled with bullets, smoke, yells and curses.

At the first shot, Chin Chin, Hawkins and the Mexican who had freed him, joined Fred and Lightning.

"This way! This way!" cried the Mexican, when the place had become filled with smoke, and he led the way to the rear door.

Throwing off the heavy bar, he dashed into a smaller building.

It was a stable, and, a minute later, every one of the five was riding for the Rio Grande.

Halting for an instant at the cavern, Fred turned back the stone, and, picking up Rita Young, dashed off again after his companions.

He was none too quick, for some of the Mexicans were already in pursuit, although not enough as yet to be dangerous.

On the five flew, through the darkness, Lightning leading the way, and at day-break the river was reached.

They had distanced their pursuers; at any rate, none were in sight, and the party halted a few minutes, while Lightning went to get his canoe.

In a short time he came paddling along; Rita and Fred entered the canoe, and they started across the big stream.

It did not take long for all to reach the opposite shore. There they halted for rest and breakfast, the latter being easily and quickly procured from the river.

While the fish was cooking, Fred and Hawkins held a consultation regarding Rita and Rodriguez, the Mexican, who had kept faith with them.

They did not wish to be hampered with either in their search for the treasure, which Fred felt confident was buried in that vicinity.

"Why don't ye send the Mexican with her t' San Antone?" asked Hawkins.

"I'm afraid she wouldn't get there," replied Fred. "The fellow likes her too well already to take her where he might have to part with her."

Hawkins grinned, and asked slyly:

"Sure 'tain't jealousy, cap?"

Fred grew red and looked confused.

"Well, s'pose we send Chin with 'em?" suggested Hawkins, enjoying his confusion.

"Oh, what good would he be?"

"Heaps! I mean it, too, Fred! He's good stuff, I tell ye straight!"

Bill said this earnestly, Lightning nodded approval, and Fred agreed to the plan.

At breakfast, accordingly, he informed Rita that he intended sending her to San Antonio with Rodriguez and Chin Chin.

"And you are not going also?" asked Rita, growing pale and looking somewhat frightened.

Fred explained that they had some other work yet to do, and that it might be several days before they could return.

"But, I am in no hurry; I have no home now, and I would prefer to remain until we all go together."

Rita said this with a pitiful little smile that touched the men; so it was settled that she should remain.

There still was Rodriguez to be got rid of, and Hawkins solved the difficulty.

"Send him t' yer uncle," he said, "with a note, sayin' we're all right, an' 'll be back soon."

This was done, and the Mexican rode away, apparently pleased to get out of the neighborhood, but looking regretfully at Rita.

"Look out for Morales!" cautioned Rodriguez, as he rode off. "He's sure to follow your trail."

"We'll take care o' him," replied Hawkins.

Seeking a secluded spot in the woods, Rita was left there, while Chin Chin was sent to the river to watch for the outlaws, and incidentally to furnish fish for dinner.

"Better take this," said Fred, as he and the others were about to leave Rita on their treasure quest.

"This" was a medium-sized revolver, which the girl accepted with a grateful smile.

Nothing was seen of the Mexicans during the day, and Chin Chin had procured a plentiful supply of fish when Fred and his companions returned.

They had found not a trace of the treasure, but cheered up after eating a hearty meal, after which Fred proposed standing first guard at the bank of the river.

"We must see them first, if they attempt to cross," he said, "and for all we know they may be on the other side now, waiting for darkness."

At the expiration of three hours Fred returned, and Lightning took his place.

The moon was up, and, feeling safe as well as tired, the young chief threw himself alongside Hawkins and was soon sound asleep.

He had been asleep about ten minutes when a man crept out from behind a tree, carrying in his right hand a long, murderous looking knife.

"This is the one! This is the one, and he must die!" he muttered, bending over Fred.

CHAPTER X.

A MADMAN—THE TREASURE LOCATED.

Fred was not destined to die then, however. Just as the old wretch was about to plunge the knife into the sleeping man, the snap of a revolver rang out, and the weapon was knocked out of his hand.

"Who fired?" cried Fred, jumping to his feet, and looking from Hawkins to Chin Chin, both of whom had, of course, been aroused.

Neither knew anything of the shot, there was no trace of any one about, and Fred would have thought he had been dreaming had not the others declared they had heard it.

Suddenly Fred thought of Rita, and hurried to the little shelter of bark and boughs which they had built for her.

At first he thought she was asleep, but quickly discovered that the girl had fainted, and called for some water.

"This explains the shot!" said Fred, as he pointed to the revolver lying beside Rita.

"But not wot she fired for!" returned Hawkins. "I wonder wot it wuz?"

"We'll know that pretty soon," rejoined Fred. "See! She's coming to!"

When Rita reopened her eyes and saw Fred, an expression of joy overspread her countenance.

"You are safe? I did not miss?" she exclaimed.

"You have saved my life! How can I ever repay you for your bravery? Another girl would have fainted before firing!" exclaimed Fred.

"A reg'lar Jim Dandy!" decided Hawkins.

"Muchee fine gal!" commented Chin Chin.

Rita was overwhelmed by all this praise and murmured something about being accustomed to firearms, but it was no use.

"I must go tell old Lightning about it," said Hawkins. "It's near time to go on watch, anyhow."

After hearing the story Lightning examined the ground around where Fred had been lying, and in doing so found the knife.

It was indeed a murderous looking

weapon, although rudely made, and being apparently a fine ground to a razor-like keenness.

Lightning looked surprised and puzzled on beholding it.

It struck Fred that the Indian had seen it before, and he asked if it was the case.

"Think so, but long ago," replied Lightning, still looking much puzzled.

"Must watch here, now," he added, after a minute's thought. "Me look for him to-day. You look for gold."

All laid down to rest—Lightning declaring he would not sleep, and it was some time before the others could do so.

Nothing, however, occurred to disturb them, and at dawn Lightning started on the trail of the midnight assassin.

About seven o'clock he returned, looking a little disappointed, and told them he had lost the trail at the foot of a stony hill a few miles away.

After breakfast the three started off again on their hunt for the treasure—Rita assuring them that she was not at all afraid of being left alone in the daylight.

"She's all wool 'n' a yard wide!" exclaimed Bill, admiringly, as they left the camp.

About noon Rita was standing outside her little hut alone, expecting Chin Chin, who had promised to bring her some fish for dinner, when she was startled to see the same old man come from behind the same tree where she had first seen him!

It was the same man, but infinitely more ugly looking, in the light of day.

He appeared to be about seventy years of age, and was a most horrible looking object.

Rita was afraid to move lest she should attract his attention, and could hear him talking as he approached.

"Fools! Fools! They have gone again to look for what is under their feet!" the old wretch was saying.

"What can he mean?" thought Rita, and, seeing he was coming directly toward her, she endeavored to steal away, but her first step attracted his attention.

"Ha! Another of them!" he cried, glaring at her, and then, appearing to remember what he had been saying, demanded:

"Did you hear me? Did you hear me, I say?"

"What if I did?" asked Rita, boldly. She had her revolver in hand, and could not see that he carried any weapon.

"Ha! You did! You must die!" yelled the old man, making a spring toward her.

"Stand back!" cried Rita, throwing up her revolver, but the would-be murderer either did not see or care for the revolver and, repeating the command, Rita fired.

The very appearance of the hideous being had unstrung her nerves, so the bullet went wild, and before she could fire again the old wretch was upon her and wrested the revolver from her grasp—at which moment Chin Chin appeared with the promised fish.

He had heard Rita's shot and knew something was wrong, but when he saw her struggling with the old man he was so surprised that he stood stock-still.

"Help! Help!" cried Rita.

This aroused Chin Chin and he rushed to her assistance, just as Rita's overtaxed nerves gave way and she fainted.

Her assailant stooped to pick her up, and as he did so the Chinaman struck him with the butt of his revolver—knocking him senseless.

Chin Chin had seen Fred bathing Rita's face the night before, and he entered her hut to procure some water.

The moment the Chinaman turned his back the old man arose to his feet. He had been "playing possum."

He looked at Rita doubtfully, and then hurried away.

When Chin Chin returned he was surprised to find the old man gone, but did not worry about it, and when Rita opened her eyes she found the Chinaman using restoratives.

Rita thanked him so sweetly that the Chinaman went into ecstasies, and, as the old man had carried off Rita's pistol, he insisted on her accompanying him to the river.

When the treasure hunters returned they were surprised and at first alarmed at Rita's absence, but Lightning quickly discovered that she had gone with Chin Chin.

The Indian also discovered signs of the old man's presence, and hurried to the river to ascertain if he had been seen.

When Rita returned to camp and told her story it excited considerable alarm.

"Who is this fellow?" asked Fred of Lightning. "I'm sure you know him!"

"Him no right here!" replied Lightning, tapping his forehead significantly.

"Crazy!" exclaimed Hawkins and Fred in the same breath.

Lightning nodded assent and that they must not hurt the lunatic—only try to capture him.

Knowing the great respect with which all Indians treat this class of unfortunates, the others agreed that the madman should not be injured.

The party were at supper when this decision was arrived at, and up to this not a word had been said regarding the old man's mutterings.

The subject of the conversation had been concealed behind a tree within easy earshot, and when he heard their decision, stole away with a satisfied smile on his face.

Scarcely had the madman gone when Fred asked:

"Did he say anything, Rita?"

"Yes. He said you were fools, for you had gone to look for what was under your feet!"

"Crazy ez a bedbug!" laughed Hawkins.

"Nothing of the kind!" cried Fred, leaping to his feet. "The treasure's as good as found!"

Red Lightning nodded gravely—he suspected what Fred was about to say. The others looked surprised.

"Yes," continued Fred, "crazy or not, the fellow told the truth. We've been searching all over for the treasure, while every day we've been walking over it, and every night, probably, sleeping over it!"

"What! Ye mean ter say it's here?"

"Yes, right here!" replied the boy captain. "This old chap probably saw it buried, and that's why he wants to drive us off. He may be mad, but there's a method in his madness!"

Though a little after sunset, there was good light yet, and Fred would have commenced the search at once had not Chin Chin rushed into the camp with the startling announcement:

"Mexicans clossing! Comin' straight to camp!"

CHAPTER XI.

THE MADMAN'S DEADLY WORK.

A hasty investigation proved Chin Chin's information to be only too true.

Mexicans to the number of fifty were crossing the river—indeed, some had already landed on the American side and were, as the Chinaman said, heading straight for the camp.

"No come after us—come after treasure."

This was Lightning's verdict after watching the Mexicans for a few minutes.

Hastily removing all traces of their presence, the little party retreated further into the wood—Lightning remaining behind to watch the bandits.

The treasure hunters halted about a quarter of a mile from their former camp, and here Lightning joined them at the expiration of an hour.

It was as he had at first declared, the Indian informed them.

The Mexicans had come to remove the treasure, and had no suspicion, as yet, of their presence.

Fred was almost frantic at the idea of losing the treasure.

Upon leaving Rita in a secure place under the protecting care of Chin Chin, the trio reached the Mexican camp and halted near the little hut Rita had occupied.

A small fire was burning, and stretched about it were fully fifty Mexicans, in various attitudes, and evidently without the slightest apprehension of danger, for only one man was on guard—he sitting, half asleep, at the butt of the tree from behind which the madman had each time made his appearance.

"Let's fire a few shots—we kin drop some of 'em 'n' then skip!" suggested Hawkins.

"No—wait for while," said Lightning.

The Indian spoke authoritatively, it seemed to Fred, and he exploded.

"Look here, Lightning! Who's running this?" he asked, angrily.

Instead of replying the Indian began searching his pockets and finally produced a slip of paper, which he handed to Fred.

Both Fred and Hawkins had watched the actions of the Indian with no little curiosity and surprise, but when Fred turned his back to the fire and by its light read the contents of the paper he was thunderstruck.

The paper was directed to Fred and signed by Colonel Soule. It was as follows:

"In case of any dispute or question of judgment, see that Starlight's ideas are carried out. Aside from his skill as a guide and scout, he is our salaried detective and has always proved himself a clear-headed, valuable man."

Fred stared at the Indian in amazement as he handed back the slip of paper. He felt pretty cheap, too, and turning to Hawkins, said:

"It seems Captain Morgan was wrong, Bill. This is the real head of the expedition, and that paper says he's the regular detective of the road. He's boss, now!"

Before Hawkins could speak the Indian interposed.

"Not so! You still captain, but, if you wait, see why no shoot now!"

Fred was rather pleased by this, while Hawkins was too surprised to say anything, and the three watched in silence.

Fully a half hour elapsed before anything occurred to break the monotony, and Fred was beginning to get restless, when he suddenly saw a man creeping from behind the tree against which the Mexican sentinel, now sleeping, was resting.

From the description, Fred recognized the man at once. It was the madman, and in his right hand Fred saw the knife which had the previous night almost ended his earthly career.

Where had he obtained the knife?

Fred asked himself this question in some alarm, for when he had last seen it the knife was in the possession of Rita, who had taken it in exchange for the revolver which the madman had carried off.

"All right! All right!" whispered Lightning, who seemed to know what he

was thinking of, and thus reassured, Fred contented himself with watching the movements of the madman.

The latter surveyed the sleeping sentinel with an expression of fiendish satisfaction on his countenance, and, almost before the watchers could realize it, the madman had caught the Mexican by the throat with one hand and with the other buried his murderous knife to the hilt in the sleeper's side.

"One!" exclaimed Lightning, in a low tone.

Fred shuddered, and, thinking of his own experience the previous night, said:

"Lightning, I can't stand this! It's too much like murder—it's pure butchery!"

"Two!" returned the Indian, pressing his arm to be silent, and looking again, Fred saw that the man sleeping nearest the dead sentinel had also been killed.

Lightning had no such scruples as Fred entertained. He would willingly have witnessed the killing of every one of the sleeping men, but it was ordained that no more should be slaughtered that night.

As the madman arose from his second victim his foot slipped in the blood of the first and he fell, and as he fell the other foot shot out, striking one of the sleepers a sharp blow in the face.

With an oath the man jumped up in time to see the madman, who fled past Fred, and near enough for the latter to touch him.

In a moment the whole camp was awake, and the fate of their comrades was quickly ascertained.

"Run! Quick!" exclaimed Lightning, when the madman passed, and, turning himself, set the example.

It was none too soon, for the Mexican who had been awakened pointed out the direction in which the madman had gone, and the entire band started in pursuit.

Fred and his companions were only a short distance ahead of their pursuers, and the noise they made while running was evidently heard by the Mexicans, whose cries redoubled when they found themselves so close to their prey.

After running about a mile, Lightning turned suddenly to the right and ran rather slowly, but very cautiously, for about a hundred yards, when he turned again and ran back towards the Mexican camp.

As they doubled back, Fred could hear the Mexicans passing them, and laughed at the easy way in which the Indian had duped them.

Straight across the camp they ran, Lightning leading the way, and for three or four miles the Indian kept right along, only halting when he reached the stony hill where he had lost the trail of the madman.

Swinging around the base of the hill, the Indian led the way into a cave on the northern side, first removing some brushwood which hid the entrance.

Inside, Fred found Rita and Chin Chin, and scarcely had he done so, when he was called upon to assist Lightning and Hawkins in re-covering the entrance of the cave.

This was scarcely done before the Mexicans could be heard approaching. They had discovered Lightning's trick and were now on the verge of beating it.

CHAPTER XII.

IN A TIGHT BOX.

When the Mexicans halted in front of the cave, those within prepared to make a desperate resistance, supposing, of course, that their retreat had been discovered, but they were quickly relieved on that point.

"There's no use going any further until daylight. We might ride over them in this infernal darkness."

Fred recognized the voice—it was that of Manuel Morales, and a moment later the speaker continued:

"Make a fire, some of you, and keep a sharp lookout. They can't be very far away."

"A large fire, captain?" asked one of the Mexicans.

"No."

"Captain," mused Fred. "I thought he was lieutenant."

When the fire was started, Manuel and another seated themselves immediately in front of the entrance to the cave.

"Senor Manuel, how did Jose die?"

It was Manuel's companion who spoke, and his question startled the listeners at the mouth of the cave. Morales was dead!

"That demon of a woman killed him the night of the marriage."

"And this woman—this she-devil—what did you do with her?" asked Manuel's companion.

"Nothing! She escaped! Let us talk no more of it!"

Manuel stretched himself beside the fire, his companion did the same, and soon the bandits were all asleep.

A guard had been posted at each side of the camp, and but for these Fred would have attempted to capture Manuel, so close did the latter lie to the entrance of the cave.

Both guards were evidently tired and sleepy. Soon one approached his comrade, and after a few minutes went back to his post, but not to do duty. Instead, he sat down with his back to a tree, and almost immediately fell asleep.

For this neglect of duty the man forfeited his life.

"If the madman were around now he would find an easy victim," whispered Fred, who, with Lightning and Hawkins, had been watching the actions of the guards.

"And, by George, he is!" exclaimed Hawkins, pointing toward the sleeper at the base of the tree.

At the same moment Fred saw a man creeping toward the guard.

A minute later, a scream of agony rent the air, and, turning, Fred saw the madman dancing about the dead man, waving the bloody knife above his head.

"Three! Three!" he cried, in horrible glee, and then plunged into the woods, followed by the bandits.

"That chap's pulled us out of a tight hole!" exclaimed Hawkins, as the last of the Mexicans disappeared from view. "They'd hev found out we wor here, in the mornin', sure ez shootin'."

Both his companions assented to this, and when Rita and Chin Chin came forward to learn the cause of the noise, Lightning said:

"Must find 'nother place, now."

Instead of leaving the vicinity, as the others expected, the Indian began to ascend the hill, and after a hard struggle, the incline being steep and the road rough, the party reached the summit.

Several huge rocks were lying about, and the spaces between them had been carefully filled with stones and earth to the height of four feet.

"Why, it's a regular fort!" exclaimed Fred, admiringly.

"Yes—but this here fort don't supply no grub," said Hawkins. "Ef we on'y had grub 'n' water we could stand off the hull gang o' Greasers."

"Come—we get that 'fore long!"

As Lightning said this he started down the hill, followed by the others, Rita remaining above.

Their destination was the cave which they had vacated a few minutes before, and here, to the astonishment of the others, the Indian unearthed large quan-

titles of dried meat and fish, and other provisions, with which he loaded his companions.

"Crazy man live here," explained Lightning, as they proceeded on their doubly difficult journey to the "fort."

After breakfast next morning the little party realized the value of Lightning's preparations.

Leaving Rita and the Chinaman, the others had already begun to descend the hill, when out from the trees almost at the base of the hill, burst the madman, followed by a crowd of yelling Mexicans.

"Nuther Greaser gone!" exclaimed Hawkins.

"Down! down!" cried Fred, hoping to escape observation, but it was too late, as an exultant yell from the bandits proclaimed, and they turned back to the fort.

In their surprise and joy at beholding their late captives, the bandits allowed the madman to escape. He had led them away, and now he brought them back.

"Blast his pieter!" growled Hawkins. "What brung him back?"

"Never mind, Bill. We're better off than we were last night. Now, look sharp. Here they come!"

In their eagerness some of the bandits had already begun to ascend the hill, which was, of course, less difficult in daylight, but this advantage was more than counterbalanced by the danger attending it, as several of them quickly found, to their sorrow.

"I'll stop that game, pretty quick!" exclaimed Hawkins, raising his rifle—and he did, killing or wounding a half-dozen of the bandits before they could get out of range.

"There! That put's th' kibosh on that little game!" he continued, turning with a triumphant smile to his companions.

"Yes, Bill, for to-day; but if you ever prayed in your life for anything, pray for a good, bright moon to-night."

Fred's earnest tone took all the triumphant feeling out of Bill.

"Yer right, Fred," he said, thoughtfully. "Ef it's dark the blasted cutthroats 'll be on uz from all sides."

The day passed without further trouble, night came, but no moon, and scarcely had the darkness fully settled, when forms could be seen flitting about in all directions at the base of the hill.

In a short time the darkness became denser and denser. Nothing could be seen, but the rattle of stones on every side warned them that the bandits were approaching from all quarters and fearfully close at hand.

CHAPTER XIII.

WARNED BY THE MADMAN.

To hear the Mexicans approaching from all quarters, and yet to be unable to see them or to guess from which point the attack would be made, was too much for the Cowboy Chief, and he was about to tell Hawkins to light a bundle of brushwood, intending to toss it in the direction where the rattle of the stones was loudest, when a scream of pain from a point directly in front, interrupted him.

There was no mistaking the cry—it was that of a man in the death agony.

"Nuther Greaser gone, or I'm a knock-kneed nigger!" exclaimed Hawkins.

The rattling of stones was now heard in all directions, gradually growing greater as they neared the spot from which the cry came, ceasing there altogether.

For a moment Fred was puzzled, and then the truth flashed upon him—the bandits were gathering about their dead companion, endeavoring to ascertain how he had been slain.

Just as this occurred to Fred, the Indian said:

"All in front now. Fire low—quick!"

The four men ranged themselves in line and Fred gave the word:

"Repeat as fast as you can. Now then—fire!"

Four reports rang out simultaneously, and the cries and curses of the bandits proved that some had taken effect. For two or three minutes a constant fire was kept up, and then—out came the moon, showing the Mexicans fleeing in various directions to escape the leaden hail from the Winchesters.

"Thank God! Now we're safe!" cried Fred.

Looking down, Fred could see several Mexicans lying motionless, evidently dead, while several more were trying to crawl away, and these latter would, also, have soon been rendered motionless but for his interference.

Both Hawkins and Lightning wished to fire on them, but Fred prevailed on them to allow the wounded men a chance.

"And now, I suppose it would be well for all of you to get some rest. I'll stand first watch, and then the rest of you can take turn."

This programme was carried out without interruption until about four o'clock, when the Chinaman came on guard and seated himself on one of the big stones forming a corner of the fort.

The moon was fading away, and the first streaks of the coming day just appearing, when Chin Chin took his seat. There was plenty of light, and everything around was distinctly visible, yet the Chinaman did not appear to see a dozen Mexicans who emerged from the woods five minutes after he came on guard.

The Mexicans advanced cautiously, but quickly, and were soon within fifty yards of the fort, yet Chin Chin gave no alarm or sign of seeing them.

"Is it treachery, or is the fool asleep?"

It was Bill Hawkins who had awakened, and, seeing the condition of affairs, asked himself this question.

He stood fingering his revolver nervously, half tempted to send a bullet through the Chinaman's head. Had he seen the latter's foot resting on a big round stone and rocking it to and fro he would certainly have done so.

Bill was about to call the others and awaken the Chinaman, when he saw the Mexicans halt, and waited to see what they were going to do.

It was soon apparent that the Mexicans had come to remove the bodies of their dead comrades, and, much as he detested them, Hawkins had no intention of interfering with such good work.

Not so the Chinaman. Just as the Mexicans started off with their dead, Chin Chin gave the big stone a tremendous push, sending it crashing down the hill, gathering speed as it went, and before the bandits could get out of the way it bounded through their midst, leaving death and destruction behind it.

"That settles it! We're in for it now!" exclaimed Bill.

"In for what?" demanded Fred, who was now awake.

Bill explained what had happened, and ended by saying:

"An' ye kin bet yer life they'll never leave us now! It's them or us, 'n' we've got t' take every chance t' thin 'em off!"

Chin Chin was in high glee over the success of his trick, and neither cared to dampen his ardor, but the truth of Bill's words was soon apparent. Scarcely a half hour elapsed before the band of Mexicans camped at the base of the hill.

Lightning looked serious when he saw this, and heard the story of Chin Chin's exploit,

"No have moon every night," he said. "Starve out anyhow!"

"Couldn't one of us get down on the other side and go for help?" suggested Fred.

"Look!" was the sententious rejoinder.

The top of the hill was almost flat, and their "fort" was nearest the edge facing the bandits. On going to the other side Fred saw several Mexicans posted at the base of the hill, and realized the force of Lightning's reply.

"Never mind!" he muttered, as he turned back. "I can try it some night, if it goes to the worst."

All that day the Mexicans remained quiet, evidently waiting for night to renew the attack.

"And they can afford to do the waiting better than we can," said Fred.

"Well, they didn't dig much to-day," said Hawkins.

"No, that's one consolation," returned Fred.

When night fell the anxiety for the moon increased, but none appeared; on the contrary, there was every indication of a storm coming, and it was certain the Mexicans would take advantage of it to attack them.

"We will have to look sharp, boys," said Fred. "If the storm and the bandits come at the same time, we'll have a tough time to pull through."

The clouds grew heavier and heavier, and it was soon impossible to see ten yards on either side.

"If they come now it's all U. P. with us," remarked Hawkins, in a kind of a Job's comforter style, adding: "We'll never see 'em till the'r' onto us!"

It was only too true, and Fred wished Rita had been sent to San Antonio, but regrets were useless; they must make the best of it.

A half-hour elapsed, and yet the expected attack was not made. What could be delaying them?

In a little while their anxiety on this point was relieved by hearing the noise of the bandits approaching, this time, apparently, approaching solidly in front—at least, the noise was all in that direction, but Lightning suspected some trickery, and bade the others keep guard at the four sides.

For a few minutes the suspense was great, but once again the madman foiled the bandits.

Suddenly a scream of agony rent the air, and as it came from the quiet side of the fort, it revealed the presence of the bandits there.

Quick to appreciate the value of this information, Lightning fired in the direction of the cry, and, as his shot brought forth another cry, Hawkins and Fred also fired, and with like result, proving that the Mexicans must be pretty thick on that side.

After some time the bandits began to separate, more than half of them passing around the hill to the rear of the fort, where they would not be under fire until they reached the little plateau at the summit, and once there in any number, the besieged had little hope of escape.

Fred realized this fully, and when he saw the bandits moving to the rear he began to despair, for now that ammunition was so low, he could afford to waste no shots on them until they were actually on the plateau of the fort.

The bandits in front, scattered all over the face of the hill, advanced rapidly, though carefully, taking advantage of every stone or inequality in the surface to keep under cover.

"It will never do to let them come together," said Fred, turning to Lightning. "You and Chin watch for the others; Bill and I will begin on these."

Raising his rifle, Fred added:

"Take only sure shots, Bill, for there's only seventy-one cartridges among four of us, while there's fully seventy-five Mexicans around the hill!"

As he finished speaking Bill fired, and Fred followed, both bullets reaching their marks, and when this was repeated, the bandits grew restless, firing back and moving about, as though anxious to charge, which was, of course, preferable to lying still to be shot at.

A minute or two later, a peculiar cry, evidently a signal, came from the rear of the fort, and with a wild hurrah the bandits charged.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE FINAL STRUGGLE.

"It's neck 'r nuthin' now!" exclaimed Hawkins, firing at the leading bandit.

"Never say die!" responded Fred.

He had scarcely spoken, when firing from the rear announced the arrival of the second party of bandits.

"But how long will it last?" thought Fred. He was already wounded twice and had but six cartridges left. Bill could have no more, and he, too, had been wounded.

The noise from Lightning's side had been something terrific, considering the number engaged, and, during a momentary pause in the front assault, Fred shot a glance to the rear.

By the light of the now brightly shining moon he saw the madman wielding a light sledge-hammer, such as is used in driving railroad spikes. His back was against the wall of the little fort, and, flanked on either side by Lightning and Chin Chin, he was a tower of strength to the besieged.

The Mexicans in front soon learned what was going on, and as their assault was meant only to cover that in the rear, they began to move around to assist their comrades, leaving a half-dozen to engage the attention of Fred and Hawkins.

Fully aware of their purpose, Fred went to the other side, saying:

"I guess you can take care of those fellows, Bill. I'll be wanted over there pretty soon."

And he was—sooner than he expected.

Just as Fred joined Lightning, the madman had returned from one of his death-dealing rushes, and stood leaning against the wall facing the bandits.

Suddenly an order was given in Spanish, which was:

"Aim all at the hammer-man! Fire!"

Guessing the meaning of the order, Fred tried to save him by slapping him on the shoulder, at the same time shouting: "Down!"

It was too late, however, and as Fred sank behind the stone work, the madman, pierced by many bullets, fell in front.

When the madman fell the bandits cheered and came forward with a mighty rush, only to be scattered in all directions a minute later.

The madman was not killed, and as they came forward he sprang up and rushed to meet them. For one minute they withstood the terrible hammer, shooting and striking at the madman, but when Lightning came among them like another thunderbolt, they turned and fled in every direction.

As the last one of the bandits disappeared down the hill, the madman reeled and fell against the wall of the fort.

Fred caught him and held him up until Lightning came, who murmured:

"Poor Phil! Poor Phil!"

At the sound of his name the dying man opened his eyes.

"Starlight! Starlight!" he muttered. Then his eyes lighted up and he continued in gasps:

"Under the house where the girl was. Look—there!"

With the last word the madman expired, and as Lightning picked up the corpse to carry it into the enclosure, Hawkins shouted:

"Git in! Git in! The Greasers 'r' comin' back!"

Placing the corpse in one corner, Lightning leaped over the wall, secured the dead man's terrible hammer, and leaping on one of the big stones, stood watching the approaching enemy.

Lightning was no longer the calm, impassive guide and detective. He was now the fierce and vengeful Indian; all the savage in his nature was aroused.

As the Mexicans came nearer he cast off his hat and coat, buckled his empty cartridge belt closer, and picking up the hammer, swung it lightly about his head.

The Mexicans evidently recognized him, and when within ten yards of the fort halted.

"Get ready, now! They're going to rush!" whispered Fred.

A minute later it came, preceded by a harmless fusillade, and was met by Fred and Hawkins with their last few cartridges, Chin Chin with the butt of his rifle, and Lightning with his mighty hammer.

When the revolvers were exhausted, Fred and Hawkins grasped their empty rifles, and with Chin Chin defended the wall like heroes, but after the first few blows Lightning leaped over the barrier into the midst of the Mexicans.

Up and down, right and left, the hammer swung, and each time a man went down. Suddenly Fred caught sight of a number of horsemen dashing around to the base of the hill.

"Good Heavens! More Mexicans!" he exclaimed.

"Not much!" yelled Hawkins. "That's Jim 'n' some o' th' boys from th' range! Hurrah! Hurrah!"

Springing over the wall, the delighted Hawkins joined Lightning, and, quickly realizing that he was correct, Fred and Chin Chin followed him.

An answering cry to that of Hawkins awakened the bandits to a sense of their danger, and, after a brief struggle, they broke and fled.

"We found a Greaser over on the range yesterday morning," explained Captain Jim. "His horse had fallen on him—broke something inside—and he was dying, but lived long enough to say he had a letter from you (Fred) to the colonel. He couldn't find the letter, but as he was sure the Greasers were after you, we concluded to look you up."

"And just in time, too!" said Fred, gratefully, and then, taking Jim aside, informed him that they had located the treasure—for he had no doubt of the madman's dying words, nor had Lightning when the young captain consulted him later.

Some little time had been consumed in narrating how the treasure had been located, and the circumstances attending the first appearance of the madman. Fred had just reached this point when Captain "Jim" asked:

"By gad! That was plucky! Where is she, Fred?"

And then, for the first time, Fred realized that he had not seen Rita since before the arrival of the cowboys. In the heat of the final struggle, and the excitement attending the arrival of the rescuers, she had been forgotten.

With a guilty, apprehensive feeling, Fred sprang over the wall, calling "Rita! Rita!"

There was no reply—the coats were there but the girl was gone.

CHAPTER XV.

RESCUE OF RITA.

A hasty search only served to confirm the young captain's fears. Rita was gone, and without leaving any clew as to whether her disappearance was voluntary or otherwise.

Lightning, who had received several severe wounds, and could not attempt any great exertion for the present, believed she had attempted to escape down the hillside during the final struggle, and had fallen into the hands of the Mexicans.

"You must leave some men here to guard," he said. "Then go quick with rest. Mebbe ketch them before they get back!"

This advice was adopted, and, leaving Lightning and a half-dozen cowboys to unearth and guard the treasure, Fred started early that morning on the trail of the bandits.

The boy captain remained in command of the little band of rescuers, which included Hawkins and Chin Chin, and numbered twelve in all.

There had been so much riding to and fro that the trail was not easily found, for, at Captain Jim's suggestion, Fred decided not to take it for granted that the Mexicans had gone directly home, and the value of this suggestion was seen when, after the trail was found, the discovery was made that they had not crossed the Rio Grande at all.

It was Fred, riding a little to one side of the others, who made the discovery. The Mexicans had entered the river, and, after swimming their horses a hundred yards down stream, had landed again on the American shore!

"Pretty cute, and it might have worked if you were a little greener, Fred," commented Hart.

"We must warn Lightning," said Fred, passing over the compliment. "These fellows are going back for the treasure, and as soon as it's dug up they'll try to seize it."

"Right you are! There's enough of 'em, too, to do it. Suppose we send Bill back? He's not feeling very good, and we will watch them while they watch the others. The girl is safe enough for the present, so you needn't alarm them by trying to get her back until everything is ready."

Although anything but pleased at the idea of being considered an invalid, Hawkins returned to warn his comrades, while Fred and his companions followed the trail of the Mexicans down the river for several miles, until it turned inland.

Up to this they had moved rapidly, for the road ahead was pretty clear, but now it was in order to expect and prepare for an ambushade, the forest being very dense.

"Better dismount, boys, and let three follow with the horses," advised Fred.

Captain Jim nodded approval of this idea, and, when it was carried out, the party moved forward cautiously.

Very shortly afterwards, the party was brought to a halt by Jim, a little in advance of the others, who held up his hand warningly.

"Greasers right ahead!" he said, on returning, and, sending back the men in charge of the horses, Fred, with the others, crept close up to the bandit camp—so close that they could hear the conversation being carried on, for Manuel evidently felt secure regarding the success of his trick.

The Mexicans, with no guard posted, were lying around among the trees, and Fred was surprised to see that there were still thirty or more of them.

"Juan and Miguel will be sufficient to watch the Americans!" was the first information gathered by the listeners.

Manuel Morales, the speaker, was sitting underneath a tree quite close to Fred, and his next words relieved the young captain's anxiety regarding Rita.

"The four who crossed below here with the girl will not hurry much, I suppose, but they will be home ahead of us, unless the silver is dug up to-day."

"Which is very unlikely, after last night's fighting," exclaimed the man to whom he was talking.

Fred signaled Jim to withdraw, and, when at a safe distance, announced his intention of pursuing those in charge of Rita.

"You and I will be enough," he said. "Chin Chin can carry a message to Lightning not to raise the treasure until we return. The others can remain here—Hawkins can come back to take charge of them. By staying here, out of sight, these fellows will be led to believe we are off on a wild goose chase!"

Fred's plan suited Jim, and after despatching Chin Chin with a note to Lightning acquainting him of the situation and of their proposed journey after Rita, the two departed, mounted on the fleetest mustangs possessed by the party.

Having no idea of being pursued, the Mexicans, in their fancied security, moved slowly and carelessly, anxious only for the return of their comrades with the treasure.

Creeping close up to where the others had camped, Fred and Jim watched them at supper—the latter for the first time beholding Rita, who was sitting a little apart from the Mexicans, pale and melancholy.

What they saw and heard made it apparent to the watchers that the plan of rescuing the girl while the Mexicans slept would have to be abandoned.

"There's mischief brewing; I wish the horses were nearer," whispered Fred.

"Keep your eye peeled, and I'll get them," returned Jim, as he hurried away.

Scarcely had he gone when the trouble was begun by a big, burly fellow, apparently in command of the party, who arose and staggered toward Rita.

"Have care, Pedro! Remember, 'tis the captain's prize!" warned one, more sober than the rest.

But Pedro gave no heed to the warning.

"Sit down, and we will talk," he said to the frightened girl, who sprang to her feet as he advanced.

He attempted to enforce his command by placing his arm around her waist, but Rita eluded his grasp, and, with a scream of terror, darted toward the spot where Fred was concealed.

"Save me! save me!" she cried, on seeing Fred.

"Run right ahead!" he answered, and, stepping aside, waited for her pursuer.

During his time among the cowboys, Fred learned some of their maxims, one of which was: "If you are going to hit a man, make no bluff about it. Hit him hard!" And he followed it to the letter, as the Mexican staggered past him.

When the Mexican dropped like a log from a straight right-hander under the ear his half-drunken comrades, thinking he had been tripped by the undergrowth, only laughed, but when he recovered, rescued and rescuers were mounted and on their homeward journey, Fred carrying Rita before him, while Captain Jim acted as rear guard!

It was not until next morning that the Mexicans got any clew to what had happened Pedro. Then the knowledge came too late to be dangerous to Fred and his companions, who recrossed the Rio Grande about noon.

"Hark!"

Fred stood with his hand uplifted.

Again the sound of firearms was heard—this time by his companions as well as himself.

They had reached the American side of the river, and, but for the warning noise, would have ridden up to the glade where the silver was buried.

"That noise is from the direction where we left Manuel," decided Fred.

"Yes. Let's hurry on!"

"Hold on! We can't go ahead with Rita. Besides, it's coming nearer. Listen!"

Again and again scattering shots were heard, and, as Fred said, they sounded nearer and nearer, until soon they were quite close at hand.

"Rita, you had better ride back along the bank, keeping within cover of the trees; for we may have to fight right here."

As Fred spoke, he turned the horse's head, and Rita, looking a little frightened and anxious, rode away, just as Chin Chin, followed by a howling, shooting, cursing band of Mexicans, burst into sight, one hundred yards away.

CHAPTER XVI.

A WILD-GOOSE CHASE.

"Take that fellow to the right!"

"All right, captain!"

The two rifles cracked and the two bandits nearest Chin Chin fell.

"Same again, Jim."

"Right!"

Again the two nearest of the pursuers fell, dead or wounded, but this time the shots of Fred and Jim were followed by a half-dozen or more from various points.

These last brought the Mexicans to a halt, and a few more shots, now centering behind Fred and his companion, caused them to retreat to the shelter of the trees.

"Get back under cover, Fred! Where the deuce is the Chinaman?"

"Back of us, somewhere, I guess," replied Fred, and, turning back to where the shooting had come from, they found Chin Chin and a half-dozen of the cowboys awaiting them.

The little Chinaman was a pitiful looking object, but Fred did not wait to hear his story. Rita was still riding away from them, and, keeping under cover, he started after her.

He was agreeably surprised to find her only a short distance away, riding back to the scene of the fight.

"Because when the shooting ceased," she explained, confidently, "I knew you must have beaten them!"

Fred could not forbear smiling at this sublime confidence in his prowess, and the smile called up a faint blush and some embarrassment, but this was quickly relieved by the appearance of Captain Jim and the others.

"I suppose we had better join Lightning!" said Fred on meeting Jim; but the latter informed him that the Mexicans were now between the two parties.

"And as there's only nine of us—or rather eight, for poor Chin's all broke up, it wouldn't be wise to try to force our way to them," continued Jim.

"Very true! But that reminds me of Hawkins—why didn't he come and take charge of this end?"

"Because your messenger, poor Chin Chin, was captured by the Greasers. The poor devil swallowed your note to Bill, it seems, and they tortured him most infernally to find out what it contained, but 'me no sabe' was all they got out of him. Then the boys, here, got onto them this morning and managed by a sudden dash to cut him loose just as we cut across."

"Poor fellow! He must have had a

tough time of it!" exclaimed Fred, sympathetically.

"I should say he had! They were going to give him a taste of fire to-day—though I can't understand why they were so anxious about the note."

Towards evening Jim stole out to "get a squint at the Greasers," returning shortly to say that half of the bandits were moving toward Lightning's camp, while the remainder were posted in a semi-circle around their own camp.

"I managed to slip through," continued Jim, "but it's no use to try to pass the crowd through without a fight. Still, some one must give the boys a hint of the intended visitors."

"Yes, and I suppose you are the best man to do it," replied Fred.

Accordingly Captain Jim departed.

He had been gone about fifteen minutes when Fred heard the report of his rifle, followed by several others, and this was renewed at intervals of two or three minutes for a half hour; then Jim suddenly appeared among them, coming from towards the river.

"Get out o' here, quick!" he exclaimed.

"What's up?" demanded Fred.

"Never mind now! Get down toward the river as quiet and quick as ye can!"

"You gave them enough warning!" retorted Fred, somewhat angry, although hastening to obey Jim's orders.

"Yes, but there wasn't anybody to warn! So I took 'em away and kept 'em from coming down on you."

"Nobody to warn?"

"That's it exactly. There ain't any of 'em left alive, or they've vamoosed already! The Greasers'll be down on us now for revenge, for I've found out they don't know the exact location of the treasure. Morales—Jose—was the only one who knew that and that's why they were so hot after the contents of the letter—thinking that would give them a hint."

They had, during this conversation, moved down to the bank of the river and, still at sea as to the utility of doing this, Fred asked what was their next move.

"I hardly know!" replied Jim, thoughtfully, adding:

"I think Spencer could look out for things here as good as any of us. Then you and I could go back and lead the Greasers up the river while they—our folks, of course—could sail back to the place where the treasure's located."

Fred quickly decided to adopt this advice, and, after advising the others of their intentions, the two captains left them.

"Here's a crowd of 'em!" exclaimed Jim, when, after they had gone a short distance, they met a number of Mexicans going toward the river.

"Keep shooting whether ye see 'em or not, and run between every shot! They won't know whether we're one or a dozen!" counseled Jim, setting the example as he spoke.

Fred had heard of "fire and fall back," but this was "fire and fly!"

Darting hither and thither, but always up the river, this queer battle was continued for two hours—the bandits being steadily led away from their prey, and fully believing the entire band of cowboys were before them.

They were approaching a long, narrow glade, and as they drew nearer an idea occurred to Fred and he communicated it to Jim.

"We will rush across the open and then wheel and empty everything we've got. I'll run up and down on the upper half, and you can do the same on the lower."

"When we're empty we can slip into the river and down stream again. That will settle their following our trail for some time, anyhow!"

Except that they remained nearly stationary until their rides were emptied, this plan was carried out, and before the Mexicans recovered from their surprise Fred and Jim were floating down the river.

Having traveled a quarter of a mile in this way, Jim declared it was safe to land, and they hurried through the woods to the hut where the silver was buried, where they found their friends awaiting them.

A consultation was held, and it was decided to start as soon as there was sufficient daylight to enable them to follow the trail of Lightning's party, trusting the safety of the treasure to the ignorance of the bandits as to its whereabouts.

Something impelled Fred to enter the little hut, and on striking a light at the entrance he found that his precaution had saved him from falling into a deep hole.

The silver had been dug up!

CHAPTER XVII.

NO TREASURE—NO TRAIL.

"What's the matter with you, captain?" asked Jim, noticing the other standing so long in the doorway of the hut.

"The treasure is gone—dug up, I fear, while we thought we were leading the Mexicans away from it!"

"Gone? You're joking!"

"Look and see!" and Fred struck another light.

"By thunder! It looks fresh, too."

"Yes—I wish it was daylight. We could then get a better idea of what's been going on. It's hard to lose it, now—and, by Jupiter, I won't!"

Fred uttered this last with a fierce determination that startled Jim, who said: "Perhaps Lightning's been carrying it off?"

"Well, whoever it is, I'll not leave the trail that leads from this hole while I'm able to move a foot and pull a trigger."

Immediately after sunrise Fred and Jim began to look for the trail of the treasure-bearers—both hoping it would lead homeward.

To their astonishment, however, there was no trail—neither in nor out of the house, nor around the hole.

The two captains stared at each other—scarcely believing their eyes.

"Come outside, Fred! There must be some explanation of this, for the hole certainly didn't dig itself."

But, after a careful examination, Jim was forced to admit that he could find no explanation.

"The devil himself couldn't carry off four horse-loads of bar silver and leave no trail!" exclaimed Jim, angrily, when they returned from the search.

"Greasers comin' in all 'round us!" announced Spencer, joining the two captains at that moment.

"Then Lightning must have got away with the silver!" exclaimed Jim.

"Perhaps. But they may have got it in some way, and are now coming back for Rita—Miss Young, I mean. You know Manuel was promised her by that fiend of a brother of his," said Fred.

"Well, what shall we do?" asked Jim.

"Stay right here and receive them! Is the road to the fort on the hill open, Spencer?"

"You mean where we found you? Yes. They're all comin' from southeast and southwest!"

"Good enough! Chin Chin!"

The little Chinaman came trotting in answer to the call, and Fred continued:

"Take Miss Young to the fort! We

may have to follow you soon—so hurry up!"

Chin Chin nodded and hurried away to notify Rita. A few minutes later both were on their way to the fort.

Relieved of any feeling of danger to the girl, Fred returned to his usual calm, quiet manner—although still more stern and determined than ever before, and gave orders that the men should conceal themselves on the northern side of the opening, thus blocking the direct path to the fort on the hill.

They were scarcely hidden from sight, when Manuel and his men entered the opening.

"Lightning must have got away with the silver, for they certainly are looking for it and not us!" whispered Fred.

"Sure! Look—there goes Manuel into the hut!"

Jim had barely uttered the words when a yell of rage and disappointment came from Manuel, causing the bandits to flock around their infuriated leader, who cried:

"Look! See the hole! There was the silver which they have stolen from us! Find the trail—we can catch them yet!"

"Look sharp, now, boys! They'll find our trail in a minute, and then pick your men before it's too late!"

The Mexicans, on finding the trail, began to give tongue, but to the surprise of those in hiding, the bandits started off a little east of them, and passed out of the opening.

"They must be after Rita and Chin Chin! I thought we were right in the way! Come! We must follow and stop them!"

As Fred spoke he was moving after the bandits, but Jim sprang after him and caught him by the arm, saying:

"Hold up, Fred! We are covering the trail of the girl and the Chinaman. The Greasers have struck something else—so don't get excited. Let's go to where that Greaser made all the row about finding the trail."

The spot Jim referred to was in the extreme northeast corner of the opening, and there they found the trail the bandits were now following.

It was badly cut up by the pursuers, but, after a careful examination, Jim asserted it to be that of Lightning's party.

"How he came to start from here is a mystery, but we've been losing time all morning by searching too near the hut. Now, if you like, we'll pick up the horses and go after 'em."

In a short time the horses, abandoned the previous night, were collected and pursuit of the pursuers begun.

Two miles were quickly covered before it occurred to Fred that the trail was leading them to the fort on the hill, and in a more direct line than the course taken by Rita and Chin Chin.

He was about to communicate his discovery to Jim, when the entire party came to a standstill at a motion from the latter, and then all could hear the noise of firearms from the northeast.

"Forward! Quick, or we'll be too late!" cried Fred, and setting spurs to his mustang, dashed ahead as fast as the density of the wood permitted.

Nearing the opening at the foot of the hill, Fred noticed that the firing was less frequent and more scattered, and, bringing his horse to a walk, moved slowly to the edge of the trees skirting around the hill.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A FIGHT AT THE CAVE.

Almost opposite where the cowboys halted beside their captain, was the madman's cave, across the mouth of which was a pile of stones and logs, while above

it were a number of Mexicans gathering and piling brushwood.

"Lightning's in there and they're going to smoke him out!" Fred explained.

"It'll be a dear smoke," returned Jim, with a grim smile, adding:

"Dismount, and be careful how you move; we may walk right into them!" admonished Fred. "That's not half of the band above the cave. You had better see if there are any below us, Jim."

Jim went ahead and, after a few minutes' absence, returned, reporting the coast clear.

"They're at the upper end," he said, "for you see by shooting from that end, when Lightning is smoked out, they would drive the boys toward the river and away from home."

The Mexicans above the cave were working like beavers, and would soon have more than sufficient brush for their purpose.

Noticing this, Jim asked.

"Isn't it time to stop that?"

"No. Let them go until they start to light it; then we'll give them a couple rounds if all stay above. If they leave one to do it we'll stop him and that will notify Lightning that we're here."

"Yes—and the Greasers, too!"

"That don't matter—But they're going now, leaving one to light and throw down the stuff!"

The man above waited until the others reached the shelter of the trees, and then stooped to apply the torch, but at the same instant Jim fired and the bandit fell into the heap of brush, which soon began to blaze up.

"There goes three of 'em to see what's up! Get ready to drop 'em when they reach the top! You take one, Spencer, I'll look after the others."

Spencer obeyed it with deadly precision the moment the word was given—the three bandits being killed or badly wounded before they reached the fire.

The firing, of course, revealed their presence to the bandits, who could be seen moving cautiously toward them.

"Keep yer eyes peeled!" warned Jim, and the next moment his rifle cracked.

"That's one less!" he said, as a scream of agony rent the air, coming from directly opposite the entrance of the cave.

Immediately following, a half-dozen shots came from the cave, and, amid the cries and curses of the bandits, the voice of Hawkins could be heard.

"Keep it up, boys! We'll soon be with ye!" he shouted, and as in earnest of his words the stones and logs began to disappear from the entrance of the cave.

While this was going on, Fred and his comrades kept the bandits engaged in a running fight, which was more noisy than dangerous—each side keeping well under cover, yet so constant and deadly, when an opportunity was offered, that the bandits could afford no attention to those in the cave.

The fight between the bandits and the captain's cowboys had been in progress about ten minutes when Lightning, Hawkins and three others dashed out of the cave toward the northern end of the glade—away from the fighting.

"Now we'll get them in the rear!" thought Fred, who saw this move, and then shouted:

"Give it to them quick and hard, now, boys! Lightning and the rest of the boys have got them in the rear!"

The cowboys answered with a cheer, and hardly had they done so before several shots came from the rear—evidently from Lightning's party, and Fred, noting this, cried:

"Now, boys! We've got them front and rear! Revolvers and bowies now!"

With a wild cheer the Texans sprang

forward and answering it came another cheer from their friends.

Finding themselves between two fires, the Mexicans made a dash for the cave, but it was not as they supposed—empty—and the storm of bullets that greeted their approach held them back.

"Close in! Close in!" yelled Hawkins, on seeing the hesitation of the Mexicans.

"Right in!" shouted the captain, and as the two parties dashed forward, a third order came:

"Light in! Me belly good shoot!"

In confirmation of this assertion, Chin Chin, who, with two cowboys, had remained in the cave, appeared at the entrance, and began firing on the Mexicans.

This was the last straw. The bandits, tired of fighting men so constantly and unexpectedly reinforced, turned tail and fled toward the river, pursued by Lightning and most of the others.

Anxious regarding Rita and the treasure, Fred hurried to the cave, where he learned from Chin Chin that both were within.

As he was about to enter, Rita came forward, and, with a faint smile, extended her hand, saying:

"My sister is within, and, I fear, dying!"

And so it proved. Two nights previous Lightning crossed the river, and there found Mrs. Cheatham, almost dead from hunger and exposure, but no longer insane, and with no recollection of what had taken place since the night of the abduction.

She recognized Fred, but in a faint, uninterested way.

As Mrs. Cheatham was too ill to be moved, it was decided to remain for the present at the cave, under the pretense of awaiting her recovery, but the necessity of this passed away that night, Mrs. Cheatham expiring in the arms of her sister just before dawn.

Her body, carefully borne by two of the cowboys, was taken to the nearest railway station, and thence to Colonel Soule's residence, from which the burial took place.

Rita and Fred accompanied the body to San Antonio, where both were warmly welcomed by the colonel and his wife.

Colonel Soule was delighted, both over Fred's safe return and the success of the expedition, for Lightning had unearthed the silver and brought it safely to San Antonio.

To avoid leaving a trail, Lightning had gone from tree to tree, beginning at the point where the Mexicans had found the trail to the hut, which was entered through the roof, and, by means of a rope, bar after bar was hauled up and carried and passed along to the further end of the opening.

So good did Colonel Soule feel that he increased the reward out of his own pocket enough to enable Fred to make Jim and the others of the rescuing party a handsome present without touching the amount of the original reward, which was divided between Fred, Lightning, Hawkins, and the devoted Chin Chin.

Colonel Soule adopted Rita Young, having no children of his own, and, a year later, she was married to his nephew, Fred, the Cowboy Captain.

THE END.

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